

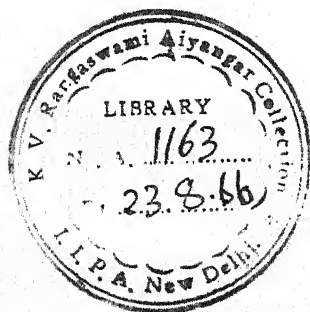
# STRAY ESSAYS IN CRITICISM

BY

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**DEDICATED**

**WITH LOVE AND REVERENCE**

**TO**

**PRINCIPAL A. B. DHRUVA.**

*By the same author.*

- (1) Withered Flowers.
- (2) Boswell's Johnson.
- (3) An Anthology of English Verse.

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## THE SONNETS OF SHAKESPEARE

"With this key  
Shakespeare unlocked his heart."

*Wordsworth.*

"'With this same key  
Shakespeare unlocked his heart' once more!  
Did Shakespeare? If so, the less Shakespeare he!"

*Browning.*

"No whit the less like Shakespeare,  
but undoubtedly the less like Browning."

*Swinburne.*



## THE SONNETS OF SHAKESPEARE

The sonnets of Shakespeare, one hundred and fifty four in number, were published without his consent in 1609 by a certain Thomas Thorpe, a kind of literary jackal who hung about scriveners' shops and picked up any manuscript whose publication he thought would bring him profit. He dedicated them to "Mr. W. H." as being "the only begetter" of the sonnets and wished him "all happiness and that eternity promised by our ever-living poet." Speculation has well-nigh exhausted itself concerning the identity of this person. The most probable explanation in our humble opinion is that he was Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton. It is impossible to say also when exactly the sonnets were written. In all probability, however, the majority of them were composed between 1593 and 1597, when the craze for sonnet-writing was at its height in England.

The entire collection of Shakespeare's sonnets falls into two groups of unequal size, divided at sonnet 126, which is a poem of twelve lines only, arranged in six couplets, and, forms a *douzain* or envoy to the first group which consists largely of

cryptic references, often passionately expressed, to the poet's friendship with a youth of high rank, who is probably the mysterious "Mr. W. H." The second group, as obscurely phrased as the first, consists for the most part of reproaches addressed to his mistress, a dark beauty whose hair is like "black wires." The identity of this dark lady of the sonnets is one of the romances of English literature. She may be Mary Fitton, as is often declared, or any other person for aught we know. Some of the sonnets are meditative soliloquies; some again are invocations to abstractions like death or time; while others again are metaphysical disquisitions on lust and the force of cupid's fire. The usual symptoms and concomitants of the passion of love, such as withering scorn, green-eyed jealousy, short-lived rapture, long-protracted suspense or sorrow, supply their *motif*. Shakespeare has here caught up, as Prof. Saintsbury says, the very sum of love and uttered it as no poet, precedent or subsequent, has ever done.

With regard to the interpretation of these sonnets there are five principal theories which are current and which have each the support and sanction of eminent scholars. The first theory, which is held by Dyce, Delius, and H. Morley,



is that they are poems about an imaginary friendship and love. The second theory, which is maintained by C. Knight, R. Simpson and others, is that they are partly imaginary and partly autobiographical. The third theory, which is advanced by Dr. Barnstorff, Herand, and Carl Karpf, is that they form a great allegory, Mr. W. H. being identical with Mr. William Himself and 'the young friend' typifying ideal manhood. The fourth theory, which has for its exponents such competent critics as Drake, Gervinus, Kreyssig, Bright, Boaden, A. Brown, Hallam, and H. Brown, is that they are autobiographical. Mr. W. H. is identified either with Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton, or with William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke. The fifth theory, which was partly suggested by Mrs. Jameson, but which was fully worked out by Gerald Massey, is that they were partly addressed to Southampton; that other sonnets were written in his name to Elizebeth Vernon; that still others to Southampton in Elizabeth Vernon's name; and that subsequently the Earl of Pembroke engaged Shakespeare to write sonnets on his behalf to the dark woman, Lady Rich. The dark lady of the sonnets is frequently identified with Mistress Mary Fitton who seems

to have been a beloved of Pembroke. Those who object to this identification argue that she was fair and not dark.

Now, are the sonnets of Shakespeare autobiographical or are they mere exercises of poetic imagination? Well, we believe that they are autobiographical not only in the sense that they unlock the poet's heart and express his own feelings in his own person but also in the sense that they are an actual record of a part of Shakespeare's life and reveal "at least the outlines of a drama which played itself out for once, not in his imagination but in his actual conduct in the world of men and women." There are, of course, difficulties in the way of such an interpretation; but they do not appear to us insuperable. These difficulties are ably put forward by Sidney Lee in his authoritative life of Shakespeare. He says that such an interpretation runs counter to Shakespeare's 'supreme mastery of dramatic power'; that for Shakespeare 'the truest poetry is the most feigning'; that the poetry of personal confessions was barely known to his era; that Elizabethan sonnets were as a rule the artificial products of their poet's fancy; and lastly, that almost all the ideas are adapted or imitated ideas, borrowed either from foreign writers of earlier times, such

as Plato, Ovid, Petrarch, Ronsard, and Desportes, or from native contemporaries, such as Sidney, Watson, Constable, and Daniel ; and that, therefore, his sonnets cannot be regarded as 'untutored cries of the soul.' As regards the first objection it should be borne in mind that Shakespeare's genius was not only dramatic but also lyrical. He turned to drama, because the drama was then in universal vogue, and because his practical mind told him that he could earn his livelihood better inside the theatre than out of it, and also because he felt that he could turn his marvellous insight into human character to better account in dramatic composition. This does not mean, however, that his genius was exclusively dramatic. In fact, even in his dramas the best scenes and passages are those in which the fusion of dramatic and lyrical elements is perfect. And this fusion is found more frequently than many of his critics suppose. Whenever there is an occasion to do so, Shakespeare becomes lyrical even in his dramas. The lyrical element in his mind nowhere finds an ampler and a more beautiful expression than in his sonnets. Prof. Emile Legouis rightly remarks that they are 'the most precious pearls of Elizabethan lyricism, some of them unsurpassed by any lyricism.' With regard to the second

argument advanced by Lee, it is enough to point out that Shakespeare had no theories about poetry, or about anything whatsoever for the matter of that. He was not a doctrinaire but a practical workman with consummate mastery over the tools of his trade. He was not a mere speculative theorist but a creative artist who won his way to the topmost peaks of Helicon. "The truest poetry is the most feigning" is a remark made by Touchstone in *As you like it*. To tear it out of its dramatic setting and ascribe it to Shakespeare and regard it as an expression of his own belief in the matter is, in our opinion, highly uncritical; for if we follow this procedure of dealing with the great dramatist we may prove almost anything and everything about him.

With reference to Lee's third argument, namely, that the poetry of personal confession was barely known to Shakespeare's age, all that we need say is that such is not the fact. The unprecedented dramatic wealth of the period has made the critic, it seems to me, impervious to the lyrical richness of the Elizabethan age. The lyric flourished in the age of Shakespeare as it has never flourished before or since in England. And what is a lyric but a personal confession of the poet's

inmost thoughts and sentiments, his inward world of passion and feeling ?

The last two arguments of Lee may be considered together. He says that Shakespeare's sonnets are full of conventional conceits and that the Elizabethan sonnet was commonly the product of a poet's fancy. Elizabethan poetry possesses an enduring vitality. Why ? Not because it was caught out of the clouds, but because, however large the conventional element in it, it was born of the union of heart and imagination, because it gave an ideal expression, as poetry should, to real feelings and real experience. Scores of Elizabethan poets turned to Petrarch and wrote in the sonnet form not because they were anxious to play the sedulous ape to him but because they felt they had similar experiences and could use his mould for the expression thereof with independent modifications of their own. Their passion is not a painted fire. An actual love story underlies the sonnets of Spenser ; and we know that he wooed and wedded the Elizabeth of his *Amoretti*. The sonnet sequence of Sidney entitled *Astrophel and Stella*, tells of a veritable tragedy, the poet's almost fatal passion for Lady Rich. And the sonnets of Drummond reveal beyond doubt an unhappy love story, the

story of his love for Mary Cunningham of Barns to whom he was affianced, but who died on the eve of their wedding, and inspired many of the poet's songs and sonnets. And even if we admit that the Elizebethan sonnet was generally a product of the poet's fancy, we have no reason to believe that Shakespeare's sonnets also were so. In fact, there are certain remarkable features which distinguish his series from those of his contemporaries. A large number of his sonnets, unlike those of any other Elizebethan writer, are addressed to a man. And the woman, to whom some of his sonnets are addressed, is the reverse of beautiful according to the conventional Elizebethan standard, so that it is impossible to pay her the conventional homage of the sonneteers. She is dark-haired, dark-eyed, and pale-cheeked. She is not a simple, artless creature. She is learned in cupid's lore and skilled not only in playing upon the virginal but also upon that infinitely more delicate instrument, the heart of man. She is neither very fair nor very cold. She is not a pink and white goddess. Her imperfections the poet sees clearly; and yet she fascinates him by some nameless charm. She has some mysterious charm which is even more potent than beauty. At times she angers her lover; and he declares to her face that she is

odious, and yet he is at her feet. She is a married lady and has been false not only to her husband but also to her lover, because she turns when it pleases her from the poor playwright to capture a more distinguished prize, his wealthy friend. Again, in contradistinction to the ordinary Elizabethan sonneteer, there is in Shakespeare no pleading, no weeping, no despairing, no raging and cursing. His dark lady is his mistress in the fullest sense. If he rages it is not against her coldness but against himself and her irresistible charm. Lastly, the sonnets of Shakespeare are less extravagant, less conceited, more exquisite in their imagination, and more genuine in their feeling than many other Elizabethan collections. Shakespeare's passion is tragic with the tragedy of real life. We agree with Lee—as who will not?—that Shakespeare had an unsurpassed, nay, an unequalled dramatic faculty, the faculty of projecting from himself things and persons that were not himself. But, as Prof. Saintsbury says, “whether even he could create and keep up such a presentation of authentic and personal passion as exhibits itself in his sonnets is a much more difficult question to answer in the affirmative. I for one seriously believe that he couldn't do it or for the matter of that any one can do it.” And for the conceits

of Shakespeare we need not go to any foreign or native source ; they can be easily paralleled from his own early plays, such as *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. Well, then, if Shakespeare was merely following a fashion, as Lee contends he was, how do you account for those marked differences, which we have already referred to, between the sonnets of Shakespeare and those of his contemporaries ? In fact, even Lee is constrained to admit that the autobiographical element in his sonnets cannot be dismissed altogether. One thing more. We know that the sonnets of Shakespeare were published long after they were written, and that they were published by an understrapper of piratical habits without the consent of their author. We know also that Shakespeare's verse was popular. Besides, the intrinsic literary merits of the sonnets entitled them to publication. If they were mere cobwebs of the mind, why were they withheld from publication for so long ? Well, the truth is that they were not mere cobwebs of the mind dealing with fanciful themes ; they were, on the contrary, connected with real persons and painful incidents and it was but natural, therefore, that they were not published by their author but were confined to circulation in manuscript among his private friends.



We shall consider one more objection that is generally advanced against the autobiographical interpretation of the sonnets. Some critics say that they lack internal harmony, that they are wanting in any visible sign of coherence, that they have no logical continuity or genuine cohesion, and that no real person can be what Shakespeare's friend is described as being—true and false, constant and fickle, virtuous and vicious, of hopeful expectation and publicly blamed for careless living. In connection with this it should be borne in mind that the sonnets express the varying feelings of at least three years—three years of love and wrong, wrath and sorrow, repentance, forgiveness, and perfected union. When Shakespeare began to write, his friend was an embodiment of childlike innocence and he had an untarnished reputation. Afterwards, however, he proved false. And the loving heart of the poet does not know what to think of it. Now it loses all faith and believes the worst about him, now faith is re-assured and it can credit no evil about him. The world knows absolutely nothing about the private injury which has been done to the player and which goes deep into his soul ; and therefore, the world has no words except those of praise for his friends. But later on when the world assails

his reputation, the loyalty of the poet's heart reasserts itself and puts down all consciousness of his friend's imperfections. As for their lack of cohesion, we are convinced, on the contrary, that they have a subtle connection each with each, though at times, but very seldom, it becomes rather difficult to perceive it. That their arrangement, as they are printed in the Quarto edition of 1609, is not haphazard, is evident from the fact that sonnet 126, which forms an Envoy to the first group, is rightly placed ; that the sonnets addressed to a mistress follow those addressed to a friend ; and that the two Cupid and Dian sonnets stand together at the close. The second group is a little less coherent than the first. But this is only natural, presenting, as it does, a struggle between will and judgment, a conflict between blood and reason. No arrangement can educe order out of these struggles : tumult and chaos is the very essence of their being.

The other theories we do not propose to discuss at all, since they show, it appears to us, more the ingenuity of their authors' minds than anything else. Shakespeare's sonnets, then, are not mere exercises of dramatic art ; they are valuable revelations of his personality. The story which underlies them is clear enough in its outline.

He loved a youth of high rank who was beautiful, wealthy, clever, and accomplished. His full name we do not know, but his Christian name *Will* we know for certain, because the poet uses it in sonnets 135 and 143, and we must remain content with it; for after all it is not very essential to the understanding of the sonnets that we should know exactly whether the youth in question is William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke, or Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton, though the evidence is strongly in favour of the latter. Shakespeare loved also a woman whose character, he knew, was stained, but whose attractions he felt powerless to resist. She bewitched him with a singular and a sort of sinister fascination. The poet himself writes in sonnet 144 :—

“Two loves I have of comfort and despair,  
Which like two spirits do suggest me still.  
The better angel is a man right fair,  
The worser spirit a woman coloured ill.”

But dearer than his dark lady of the virginal was the youth whom he worshipped with an almost fond idolatry. Shakespeare's friendship was no mere profession, speedily made and as speedily retracted; it was a steadily burning flame. Friendship is for him not a mere formality; it is

at once the medicine and the wine of life ; it is the marriage of true minds, the golden thread which unites two hearts together. It is identical with love or even better, since it is free from the grossness and the arrowy pangs of desire which almost invariably accompany the passion of love. His friendship with that youth was the comfort, the honour and the blessedness of his life. But, alas, the friend yielded to the seductions of the poet's mistress, and the wound thus inflicted goes deep into Shakespeare's heart :—

“Love knows it a greater grief  
To hear love's wrong than hate's known injury.”

The poor player who lived for some time in the life-giving beams of friendship is now betrayed and he feels how miserable it is to be deceived by those whom we hold dearest and nearest to our bosom. Life becomes dark. He contemplates suicide. But anon his better nature asserts itself. He does not turn with fierce resentment against his friend, but Christ-like tries to think well of him and to plead in his defence. After a long absence the friends meet, there are confessions and words of repentance on both sides, forgiveness and reconciliation follows. The two hearts are once more united together. All impediments to

the marriage of true minds are put aside ; and the friendship that seemed ruined is built anew stronger than before, based not on beauty, nor interest, nor anything else that Time can deface, but on Love, which is not Time's fool, but bears it out even to the edge of doom. The sonnets of Shakespeare are thus the Triumph of Love and Friendship.

What we learn from the sonnets of Shakespeare about his personality is obvious. He was a man of boundless personal devotion. He was extremely sensitive to the charm of beauty in man or woman. He was full of the milk of human kindness, so that even if he was wronged he could transcend his private injury and forgive his worst enemy, no matter how excruciating the pain which he might have occasioned him. He did not possess, of course, the lofty purity of Milton's character, but neither did he possess the puritan austerity, the loveless severity, and the proud detachment from the ordinary interests of life, which distinguished the great idealist and alienated even his own daughters from him. Shakespeare had a warm ardent heart and he could not keep aloof from the pleasures of the world with the strength and self-possession of Milton. But it should never be forgotten that, whatever the errors of his life

may have been, they were never cold-blooded, hard, and selfish sins. They were the inevitable outcome of his sensitiveness, his imagination, and the self-abnegating devotion of his heart. He went through a furnace of suffering but came out pure gold ; which shows that he had in the deeps of his personality some central sanity and strength which could triumph in the end over all the evil and misery of life. And that is why he is ultimately an optimist, though there are in his sonnets all the possible moods which pessimism can run into. He did not escape from reality, but looked the giant agony of life full in the face and thus won back his faith, his hope, and his peace of mind. "There is a soul of goodness in things evil," he says in *Henry V* and in one of the sonnets he speaks of the "benefit of ill" and how "better is by evil still made better." Here is the beautiful passage :

"Oh benefit of ill ! now I find true  
That better is by evil still made better ;  
And ruined love, when it is built anew,  
Grows fairer than at first, more strong, far greater."

We shall now consider the form of Shakespeare's sonnets. Shakespeare ignored the somewhat

complex metrical scheme of the Petrarchan sonnet. His sonnets are not divided into an octave and a sestet as is the Italian sonnet. Nor are the rhymes confined to a total of five. He follows the example set originally by Surrey and adopted by his contemporaries and aims at a greater metrical simplicity than either the Italian or the French sonnet. His sonnets consist of three quatrains clinched by a concluding couplet. And the rhymes in the quatrains are alternate and independent. Thus the total number of rhymes used is seven, two in each quatrain and one in the final couplet. There are certain mechanical peculiarities which are worth noticing. There is generally a strong caesura at the second foot of the opening line, a still stronger stop at the end of the second, where as yet there is no rhyme, and at each second line of these non-completed couplets throughout. The Shakespearean sonnet is thus elaborately built up or accumulated. It is not like the Italian sonnet which is more or less continuously wrought in its octave and in its sestet. This accumulative character is noticeable almost everywhere. It fits in admirably with the intensely meditative character of his sonnets, and it constitutes the strongest appeal of the greatest examples. These peculiarities are not, of course,

observed with monotonous rigidity. They are varied with that supreme artistic skill which we find in his blank verse. In the beautiful sonnet 71, for instance, the first two quatrains are indissolubly woven into one piece from the first syllable to the last. Nevertheless, these peculiarities are generally noticeable and should, therefore, be borne in mind by every student of Shakespeare's sonnets.

We may enumerate here a few more important characteristics of Shakespeare's technique in his sonnets. First and foremost, he obtains a surprising simplicity by keeping the lines end-stopped in a proportion quite unknown in his blank verse. The greater number of the sonnets are end-stopped in every line. The utmost freedom which he allows himself is that of sonnet 116, in which end-stopping occurs after the first three lines. Frequently there is no greater variation than a single clause covering two lines :

"Full many a glorious morning have I seen  
Flatter the mountain tops with sovereign eye."

Another characteristic is the astonishing proportion of lines consisting entirely or almost entirely of monosyllables, particularly in closing



lines and couplets. Here are a few examples, taken at random from among scores of the same kind :

“Your own glass shows you when you look in it.”

“But weep to have that which it fears to lose.”

“And mock you with me after I am gone.”

“All this the world knows well ; yet none knows  
well  
To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell.”

Frequently, there is no more than a single disyllable in the concluding couplet. Such lines incline to be very slow of movement, and weighed with spondees, or groups of consonants, or retarded with pauses ; and an impression of great solemnity and deliberation, or of spiritual oppression, thus obtained, is the characteristic mood of Shakespeare's sonnets.

A device, which was foreshadowed by Marlowe in blank verse and by Drayton in the sonnet, is used by Shakespeare with marvellous skill : the device of moulding a line of monosyllables round one long, sonorous, and impressive word of Latin derivation :

“With *insufficiency* my heart to sway.”

“Who for thyself art so *unprovident*.”

The admission of such words brings in an almost inevitable pyrrhic, and lightens the line, or concentrates its weight on the stressed syllable of the long word. A similar concentration results where the poet introduces one of his favourite compound adjectives :

“The sad account of *fore-bemoaned* moan.”

“And his *love-kindling* fire did quickly steep  
In a cold valley-fountain of that ground.”

It is by varying the position of such rhythmic ‘crests’ in the line that Shakespeare obtains the most subtle music and movement from the commonest of foot-modulations, such as the pyrrhic, the spondee, or the initial trochee.

Several sonnets are made up of a single sentence whose divisions correspond with the quatrains and the couplet. The most marked pause is as a rule at the end of the last quatrain, and quite frequently the sentence ends there, and the concluding couplet contains a bitter summary or comment. In some of the finest sonnets, such as “When to the sessions of sweet silent thought,” or “Not mine own fears, nor the prophetic soul,” there is a distinct pause at the end of each quatrain, but there is seldom, if ever, a definite

break after the second quatrain, so that any separation of ideas, or renewal of poetic force at the ninth line, which may suggest the division of the sonnet into octave and sestet, is strictly avoided.

The form of his sonnets is invariable. Being Shakespeare, he dared to tempt monotony, and, besides, used the simplest form of all. His is the longest of all the great sonnet-sequences. The simplicity of his form is partly responsible for the subdued and controlled effect, the detachment with which tremendous passion is presented, as the unvarying repetition of one metrical unit contributes to the overwhelming cumulative power of the whole series.

No analysis, however searching, can define the subtle charm of Shakespeare's sonnets, or detect the hidden secret of their beauty. "They mock at criticism." Nevertheless, with a view to helping the student in his appreciation of these sonnets, we shall consider briefly some of their special poetical excellences. They are not, of course, ideally perfect; nothing that is born of man is so. And their defects are obvious. They are unequal. "Passages of the highest poetic temper," as Lee rightly says, "alternate at times with unimpressive displays of mere verbal

jugglery." They are obscure and are spoilt in more than one place by extreme subtlety. There is at times a merciless quibbling upon words. They are sometimes, notably in those that are addressed to the dark lady, wanting in coherence or logical continuity. And the final couplet is not infrequently the least forceful part of the performance. But all these blemishes sink into insignificance when we think of their sheer poetic loveliness. If the end of poetry is the communication of rhythmic verbal beauty, in all modes of thought and feeling, there is no sonnet-sequence or even single sonnets which can compare with Shakespeare's. The poet shows an unexampled mastery of rhythm and diction, a new naturalness of phrase and feeling, unencumbered by any fashion of style or depressing regard for authority. There can be no lyric loveliness intenser than what we find in some of these sonnets. We meet here many a "precious phrase by all the Muses filed." At times, indeed, we come upon an aria so beautiful that "the sense aches at it." Shakespeare at his best is incomparably the greatest of the English sonneteers. His sonnets are perfect in shape and texture. Each one is a unified development of a single idea or emotion, rising to a climax in the concluding couplet. The poet's mastery

of sound-suggestion is simply wonderful. The s sound is one of the most rebellious in the English language. Even Tennyson complained of the trouble he had in "kicking the geese out of the boat," as he said. But Shakespeare easily masters all its capabilities and avoids all its asperities. Observe, for instance, the delicate lisp of the following four lines with which one of the finest of his sonnets opens :

"When to the sessions of sweet silent thought  
I summon up remembrance of things past,  
I sigh the lack of many a thing I sought,  
And with old woes new wail my dear time's waste."

Mark Pattison arraigned the sonnets of Shakespeare as generically inferior because of their abnegation of the Petrarchan form. The argument is not only pedantic but also fallacious. A more intricate arrangement of rhymes has no inherent artistic superiority to a less intricate arrangement. No type of recognised sonnet can be reckoned better than another in respect of mere form. And Shakespeare's form was well-chosen, in as much as it is able to carry the full tide of the poet's thought and emotion, fits in admirably with the intensely meditative character of his sonnets, as we have

already said, and, above all, "yields a special lissomness of movement, never excelled before or since."

We have already drawn the reader's attention to the striking originality of Shakespeare's sonnets. There are some critics, of course, who persist in regarding them as artificial and conventional like the general run of the Elizabethan sonnet. They find even in their most passionate tones nothing but an extravagant adulation of a wealthy patron. And they regard Shakespeare as "a sensual sycophantic snob, mad with jealousy and foiled desire." Such critics expose their own stupidity. They dishonour themselves. They dishonour the Muses. They dishonour human nature. But all their mouthings at the moon are ineffectual. For, though we may not be able to construct a part of the playwright's biography out of his sonnets, they testify beyond the least shadow of a doubt to his personal humility, his pride in his art, and his understanding of the deeps of passion. Concerning his originality, we shall here quote a passage from Oliver Elton's excellent book on English poetry, entitled "The English Muse :"

"Shakespeare in these confessions dislocates the whole conception of romantic love ; this

is the most original feature of the *Sonnets*. The 'dark lady' has neither beauty nor virtue, but simply the power of attraction. The poet *odit et amit* ; sometimes he curses her lies and his own weakness, sometimes he asks her to delude him to his face. She has stolen from him the splendid youth, whom he adores from afar, from below, in whom he sees truth and beauty incorporate, to whom he promises eternity in rhyme ; who consoles for everything and to whom he forgives everything—Friendship is often glorified in Renaissance literature, in a manner foreign to modern feeling ; but the situation presented in the *Sonnets* seems to stand alone."

Their monumental expression of self-forgetting devotion makes the heart of the poetic-minded reader leap up with joy. "No poems," says Fowler, "in the whole history of English verse take higher rank for sweetness and power." The musical quality of their verse is partly due to alliteration—not a clumsy repetition of the same initial letter, but the recurrence of two or more consonantal sounds subtly interwoven throughout a quatrain or a couplet. Here is a splendid example.

“Let me not to the marriage of true minds  
Admit impediments. Love is not love  
Which alters when it alteration finds,  
Or bends with the remover to remove.”

Observe that *r* and *t* sounds run throughout the quatrain, *r* occurring nine times and *t* fourteen times. In the opening two lines *m* occurs six times and *d* three times. In lines two and three *l* occurs four times and the first line opens with *l*. The *d* sound is taken up again in the emphatic ‘finds’ and ‘bends’ of lines three and four respectively; and the *m* sound in the emphatic ‘remover’ and ‘remove’ of the fourth line. The music of the *Sonnets* is due partly also to an exceptionally rich modulation of vowels. In “And mock you with me”, for instance, five successive monosyllabic words contain all five vowels. Shakespeare was beyond doubt no mere wild untutored genius, but an artist of the subtlest skill, though an artist by instinct rather than design. His power is the outcome of his passionate sincerity, his intense intellectual integrity, his high seriousness, and also his “skilful blending of a diction generally simple with recondite expressions that add dignity and distinction.” The *sonnets* are remarkable for their uniform condensation of thought and



language, their intensity, their concentration, and their sustained energy. They have all the virtues of the Elizabethan sonnets, their elaboration and adornment, their rich sweetness, grace, delicate loveliness and charm, and their copious, slow-moving flow of words. But they have also a stateliness and a splendour rarely met with in the quatorzains of his contemporaries. When contrasted with the sonnets of Milton and Wordsworth, they possess a sweeter, richer, and more graceful beauty which stamps them as indubitably Elizabethan.

The poetic power with which Shakespeare reproduces for our delectation the sights, sounds, and scents of Nature is simply remarkable. He shows almost for the first time in English poetry a directness of observation in his sketches or rather images from nature, for in "the sonnets scanty plot of ground" there is no room even for sketches, not to mention set or elaborate descriptions such as those of the horse and the hare which we find in his *Venus and Adonis*. Here the whole impression is conveyed by a magical touch, often with a single word, as in "yellow leaves," or "the teeming autumn," or "Three April perfumes in three hot Junes burned," or "*Bare ruined choirs that shake against the cold.*" It is the same

marvellous skill which has given us in his plays such unforgettable lines as

“Daffodils

That come before the swallow dares, and take  
The winds of March with beauty,”

or

“As tunable as lark to shepherd’s ear,  
When wheat is green and hawthorns buds  
appear.”

Shakespeare’s attitude towards Nature is not mystical like that of Wordsworth. His joy is not the outcome of any inner sympathy with her spirit or any keen sense of her educative and healing power; it is a pure artistic joy born of an acute observation of the plenitude of her might and beauty.

The finest and most passionate sonnets are those in which the poet gives himself, with all his love and genius, to the young man who dazzles him even after he has been betrayed by him. Their poignant pathos is thrown into relief by the rare beauty of the images and the style and by a subtle melody which has never been surpassed. Like “the floor of heaven” they are “thick inlaid with patines of pure gold,” whose lustre can never be dimmed by any changes and fluctuations in

literary taste. Prof. Saintsbury with his usually unerring critical insight combined with a literary *gusto* that seldom fails to be inspiring writes about the sonnets of Shakespeare in a lofty strain of enthusiasm. They contain, he says, "no small proportion of the highest, the intensest, the most exquisite jewels of English poetry." "Their general characteristic as verse is a steady soaring music, now lower, now higher, never exactly glad but always passionate and full, which can be found nowhere else—a harmonic of mighty heart-throbs and brain-pulsings which, once caught, never deserts the mind's ear. Like all the greatest poetry, this is almost independent of meaning, though so full of it; you can attend to the sense or disregard it as you please, certain in each case of satisfaction. The thoughts are not so far-fetched, the music not quite so unearthly, as in some poems of the next generation, but they are more universal, more commanding, more human. There is nothing that the poet wishes to say that he cannot say, and there is hardly a district of thought and feeling into which he does not at least cast glances of unerring vision." "He carried poetry—that is to say, the passionate expression in verse of the sensual and intellectual facts of life—to a pitch which it had never previously

reached in English, and which it has never outstepped since. The coast-line of humanity must be wholly altered, the sea must change its nature, the moon must draw it in different ways, before that tide-mark is passed."

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## THE SONNETS OF MILTON

"Chief of organic numbers !  
Old Scholar of the Spheres !  
Thy spirit never slumbers,  
But rolls about our ears  
For ever and for ever !"

*Keats.*

"Thy soul was like a star and dwelt apart :  
Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea :  
Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free,  
So didst thou travel on life's common way,  
In cheerful godliness ; and yet thy heart  
The lowliest duties on herself did lay."

*Wordsworth.*

"O Mighty-mouth'd inventor of harmonies,  
O skill'd to sing of Time or Eternity,  
God-gifted organ-voice of England,  
Milton, a name to resound for ages."

*Tennyson.*

Milton is "a figure of transcendent interest, the most lion-hearted, the loftiest-souled of Englishmen, the one consummate artist our race has produced, the only English man of letters who in all that is known about him, his life, his character, his poetry, shows something for which the only fit word is sublime."

*John Bailey.*



## THE SONNETS OF MILTON

Altogether Milton has written no more than twenty-four sonnets. Out of this number five are in Italian ; and the remaining nineteen in English, one of which, "On the new forcers of Conscience," is an example of what is technically known as "Sonetto Caudato," or a "tail sonnet," in which the sonnet is extended by the addition of a tail, consisting of a three-foot line, and a five-foot couplet, repeated as often as the poet likes. This form of the sonnet was specially reserved in Italian for humorous and satirical subjects. In Milton's sonnet the "cauda" or the 'tail' is repeated only twice, so that it consists altogether of twenty lines—fourteen lines of the regular sonnet with extra six lines of the 'tail'. This sonnet of Milton is rather important, since it indicates clearly the poet's religious views. Milton believed that in religious matters every man should be free to follow the guidance of his own conscience. He was opposed not only to Episcopacy, the highly formalised type of religion imposed by the bishops, but also to Presbyterianism which displaced it, sought to impose its own form of church government, and was thus merely the substitution

of one rigid system for another. The Presbyterians, who had a majority in the Parliament, were 'the new forcers of conscience,' in as much as they were even more fiercely intolerant of difference of opinion than the Episcopalians under Archbishop Laud had ever been. And naturally, therefore, Milton who was a Puritan, wishing to cleanse the Anglican church from within, and also an Independent who advocated toleration and that each congregation should be left free to handle its own affairs, expresses in this sonnet his contempt of the Presbyterians, saying, "New Presbyter is but old Priest writ large." His spirit of scorn and denunciation finds an excellent expression in this sonnet, which is also somewhat humorously worded, as it should be, considering the form in which it is written. Moreover, so far as we know, this is the only sonnet of its kind written in English literature. There is no other example of the "Sonnetto Caudato" in the whole range of English poetry.

Leaving his five sonnets in Italian apart and also the single 'tail' sonnet to which we have just referred, Milton has only eighteen sonnets in English to his credit, as against one hundred and fifty-two of Shakespeare and five hundred of Wordsworth. No eminent master of the sonnet



in England has probably written less in that form than Milton. Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella* is a collection of one hundred and ten sonnets, Spenser's *Amoretti* of eighty-eight, and Rossetti's *House of Life* of one hundred and one, apart from his numerous single sonnets on pictures, poets, and nature. Even Keats who died so young wrote as many as fifty-two. Why, even Mathew Arnold, in spite of his frugal note and his characteristic classic self-restraint and his poetic reticence, wrote no less than twenty-seven pieces. It should be borne in mind, however, that though the sonnets of Milton are very few in number they are surprisingly various in kind. One of them, the earliest, called the Nightingale sonnet, deals with the theme of love. By the way, this is the only poem of Milton which treats of the sacred subject of love. He is one of the few English poets who have not sung of love. This sonnet is, therefore, of exceptional interest in the poetry of Milton. Nor is it intrinsically very poor, though in Prof. Raleigh's opinion it is 'his earliest and poorest sonnet.' We beg to differ. Lines like 'Warblest at eve when all the woods are still' and 'Thy liquid notes that close the eye of day' are good enough to impart grace and distinction to any sonnet, however paltry. It has also another point of interest about

it. Milton follows in it the Petrarchan tradition and writes in the role of a graceful and courtly lover. The later English sonnets reflect a complete change of attitude. The romantic note which is obvious here disappears entirely, and the style is plain and direct with none of the traditional phraseology of the sonnet. In other words, the Nightingale sonnet is the only sonnet of Milton which is both romantically conceived and romantically phrased.

Well, we were saying that considering the small number of Milton's English sonnets, they are remarkable for their variety of theme. One of them, the sonnet on the Nightingale, deals with love. A few are sonnets of friendship. Some of them are autobiographical, others political, while still others are religious and satirical. Milton must also have credit for the earliest, and one of the best, of humorous sonnets, *Tetrachordon*, with its good comic rhymes. The sonnet has, since his day, received, no doubt, further extensions. The great glory of discovering the topographical sonnet belongs to Bowles, the inspirer of Coleridge. And Rossetti reigns almost alone in sonnets of a descriptive-pictorial kind. But it was Milton who showed for almost the first time in England the unmatched suitability of the sonnet form for

purposes of "occasional" poetry and thereby cleared the way not only for topographical and descriptive-pictorial sonnets but also for those of every other kind. Emphasizing the variety of subjects covered by Milton's sonnets, Prof. Saintsbury sums up the whole matter in one significant sentence: "we have," he says, "love, meditation, ethical compliment, epicede, polemic, and, in the most miscellaneous sense, "occasional" verse, all exemplified in this little handful" of his sonnets.

The position of Milton in the history of the sonnet is one of great importance. Before his time the sonnet was almost entirely confined to a single theme, that of the poet's unhappy love, which was commonly a mere make-believe and had rarely any existence in the world of fact. Milton enlarged the scope of the sonnet, as regards its subject-matter, so that in his hands it ceased to be merely a poem of love, but became, as Wordsworth says,

"A trumpet whence he blew  
Soul-animating strains—alas, too few!"

The changes which Milton made in the theme of the sonnet have received a final phrasing from the pen of Lander:

“He caught the sonnet from the dainty hand  
Of Love, who cried to lose it ; and he gave  
The notes to Glory.”

It is this widening and ennobling of its theme that constitutes Milton's greatest service to the sonnet. We have already said that the sonnet before the time of Milton was given mostly to the single subject of love, and that the love with which it dealt was frequently a mere pretence, existing only in the poet's imagination without any counterpart in the world of reality. The mistresses to whom the Elizabethan sonneteers poured their passion were mere phantoms of the mind, shadowy and unsubstantial creatures lacking the concrete reality of flesh and blood. And the thousands of sonnets that were written were for the most part imitative, artificial, conventional, and fanciful. They had no genuine emotion. The sonnet had, in consequence, acquired a disrepute for extravagant conceits and idle verbosity. Milton emancipated it from this ignoble tradition of overblown and insincere verbiage and set it coursing gloriously on a new career, passing the unmelodic, didactic, satirical, cold and prosaic eighteenth century in disdain, till it found an honoured lodgement with Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Mrs. Browning, Rossetti,

Mathew Arnold, and is now in our own times a welcome and esteemed guest everywhere. Whatever the subject of Milton's sonnets, they are almost always the product of a personal experience and are remarkable for the characteristic sincerity of their author. They are free from the elaborate trifling, the far-fetched conceits, and the fanciful hyperboles of the Elizabethan type. Instead they have high seriousness, forceful directness, unadorned simplicity, and triumphant truth. They impress us not with their author's cunning, but with his emotional integrity. They do not savour of art for art's sake, of something written to while away an idle hour, or to fill out a sequence, or to follow a fashionable fad. Even at their weakest they convey, as Mark Pattison rightly observes, "the sense that here is a true utterance of a great soul." Almost every one of his sonnets, we feel, was called forth by some actual event or strong emotion, without which they would not have been written at all. Though Milton was always, in the words of Ernest Rhys, "the lyric agent of his own passion," the sonnets are the most immediately personal of all his poems. "Traces of the peculiar character of Milton," says Macaulay, "may be found in all his works; but it is most strongly displayed in the Sonnets. They have no epigram-

matic point. There is no ingenuity of thought, no brilliance of style. They are simple but majestic records of the feelings of the soul ; as little tricked out for the public eye as his diary would have been. A victory, an unexpected attack upon the city, a momentary fit of depression or exaltation, a jest thrown out against one of his books, a dream which for a short time restored to him that beautiful face over which the grave had closed for ever, led him to musings which, without effort, shaped themselves into verse."

The sonnets of Milton differ from those of the Elizabethans in almost every respect. They have none of their light grace, their richness, and ornate beauty. But they are distinguished by vigour, dignity, and exaltation. They are more sonorous. They are restrained and classic, and are characterised by what Wordsworth calls "republican austerity." Miss Seward, one of their profound admirers, praises their "hardness," their "energetic plainness," and compares them to a "pointed and craggy rock, the grace of which is its roughness." The sonnets addressed to the poet's personal friends, Lawrence, Cyriak Skinner, and Lawes, are remarkable for their elegance, their stately grace, and their Horatian charm. Those on his blindness and his dead wife reveal

a profound pathos ; while that on the massacre in Piedmont burns with indignation and glows like a deep fire. In several of his sonnets, indeed, intensity is a distinguishing feature. But, as Macaulay says again, "they are almost without exception dignified by a sobriety and greatness of mind to which we know not where to look for a parallel."

Another point of importance with regard to Milton's position in the history of the sonnet is that he took to the writing of the sonnet at a time when it had already gone out of fashion, so that he may be said to have revived it and given it a fresh lease of life. This was in itself a most valuable service which he rendered to the cause of the sonnet, for which every lover of English poetry should feel grateful to him.

Before the time of Milton sonnets were written in sequences. Now, in the opinion of many competent critics, a sonnet-sequence is an artistic contradiction in terms. It sins against the true genius of the sonnet, which is essentially solitary and self-contained. It runs counter to the rule that a sonnet must be absolutely complete in itself, that it must be the evolution of one thought, or one emotion, or one poetically apprehended fact. With the unerring instinct of true genius Milton

discovered the artistic inconsistency of a sonnet-sequence, and defied the tradition of writing sonnets as a continuous series. His sonnets are, thus, organic wholes, beginning and ending within their own limits. They are free from that taint of incompleteness which is inevitable in a set of consecutive sonnets. Each is like a blossom on its own bough, or a radiant pearl in its own shell, or a star shining fixed and finite in its own blue depths of the sky.

Milton revived the sonnet. He widened the range of its subject-matter. He showed its supreme suitability for purposes of "occasional" poetry. And he revealed the true genius of the sonnet by giving up the practice of writing in sequences and by composing single sonnets, self-sustained and complete in themselves. Nor is this all. He proved for the first time in English poetry, though several attempts had been made before him, that the Italian mode of the sonnet could be successfully transplanted into English. With his consummate critical judgment he set aside the various sonnet forms adopted by Shakespeare, Spenser, and other famous English poets who had preceded him, and reverted to the Italian type, following its canon more strictly than any English poet before him. The most



prominent feature of the Italian form is its division into two parts, the first part consisting of eight lines and therefore called the 'Octave' and the second part consisting of six lines and therefore called the 'Sestet'. The sonnet, be it remembered, deals with one thought, emotion, sentiment, or mood. The first part states the idea, and the second part develops and completes it. The second part, therefore, often contains some application of the special idea expressed in the first part, or some striking reflection suggested by it. There is a pause at the end of the eighth line, a pause which corresponds to a turn in the thought or a change to a different aspect of the subject. This turn is technically called the 'Volta' or 'diesis'. Now this turn must not amount to an abrupt break of subject. The same topic should be taken up, maybe from a fresh point of view, and carried on to the conclusion. The nature of the pause at the end of the eighth line, which corresponds to the turn in thought, should be, in the words of Pattison, "not full, nor producing the effect of a break, as of one who had finished what he had got to say, and not preparing a transition to a new subject, but as of one who is turning over what has been said in the mind to enforce it further." Milton's second sonnet,

entitled "On his having arrived at the age of twenty-three," fully exemplifies these few foregoing remarks which we have made :

"How soon hath Time, the subtle thief of youth,  
Stolen on his wing my three-and-twentieth year !  
My hasting days fly on with full career,  
But my late spring no bud or blossom show'th.  
Perhaps my semblance might deceive the truth  
That I to manhood am arrived so near ;  
And inward ripeness doth much less appear,  
That some more timely-happy spirits endu'th.  
Yet be it less or more, or soon or slow,  
It shall be still in strictest measure even  
To that same lot, however mean or high,  
Toward which Time leads me and the will of  
Heaven ;  
All is, if I have grace to use it so,  
As ever in my great Task-Master's eye."

In this sonnet the bipartite division into octave and sestet. is obvious : there is a full stop at the end of the eighth line. In the first part, the octave, the poet declares how time has passed, while he has apparently shown no promise of achievement. In the second part, the sestet, he declares that nevertheless he has in mind a high

mission which shall be fulfilled in God's own good time. Thus the octave in the above sonnet makes a statement ; and the sestet draws the conclusion or reflection suggested by it. But it should be noted that Milton is not very strict in observing this bipartite division of the sonnet. The eighth and ninth lines are frequently connected by what the French call 'enjambement' or overflow. The tide of feeling overflows the metrical breakwaters ; and the pause which should occur at the end of the eighth line falls within the seventh line, or the eighth, or the ninth ; or at the end of the seventh or the ninth, once, indeed, at the end of even the eleventh line, as in the sonnet "To Mr. H. Lawes, on his *Airs*." One of the best of his sonnets, indeed, that on 'the Late Massacre in Piedmont,' is one continuous whole, the pauses occurring only in the middle of the lines. These changes, however, must not be regarded, as many critics of Milton's sonnets have erroneously done, as something new ; for these variations, though exceptional, were familiar to the Italian sonneteers. And Milton, who was well-versed in Italian literature, was familiar not only with the rigid form of the Italian sonnet as practised by its greatest exponent, Petrarch, but also with its comparatively less rigid modes as practised by

Giovanni della Casa, in particular, who was fond of run-over lines, internal pauses, and avoidance of regular metrical pauses, and a copy of whose sonnets was owned by Milton, which is now in the New York Public Library. It is only in seven of his sonnets, leaving the tail-sonnet apart, that Milton preserves the division into the octave and sestet.

Another distinctive feature of the Italian sonnet is that the octave is often sub-divided into two quatrains or stanzas of four lines, and the sestet into two tercets or groups of three lines. In other words, there is a strong pause not only after the eighth line, but often also at the end of the fourth and the eleventh. This was regarded as the ideal by the early Italian critics. Their theory was that the first quatrain should state a proposition, the second should prove it, the first tercet should confirm it and the second should embody the final conclusion. According to these strict divisions of the Italian sonnet, then, the first quatrain brings forward the idea or feeling to be expressed and the second quatrain develops it or states it fully. The first tercet leads up to the special application of the idea in the second tercet, which contains, therefore, the essence or the kernel of the whole sonnet. In Milton the octave is divided into quatrains in the case of only four

sonnets, and the sestet into tercets in two sonnets only, or three at the utmost, if we regard a semicolon as a significant pause. The majestic flow of Milton's melody obliterated the distinction between the two main divisions, the octave and the sestet, of the sonnet, not to talk of the minor divisions into quatrains and tercets, and thereby imparted a surpassing dignity, unity and continuity to his sonnets. In an undated letter of 1833, addressed to Alexander Dyce, Wordsworth comments on Milton's habit of enjambement or overflow in his sonnets and writes : "In the better half of his sonnets the sense does not close with the rhyme at the eighth line, but overflows into the second portion of the metre. This is not done merely to gratify the ear by variety and freedom of sound, but also to aid in giving that pervading sense of intense unity in which the excellence of the sonnet has always seemed to me mainly to consist." The most striking feature of Milton's sonnet technique, apart from his disregard of the Petrarchan divisions, is thus the rarity of end-stopped lines. Except for the presence of rhyme Milton constructs a sonnet as he does a blank verse period or paragraph, a woven harmony of long and short phrases, crossing the line limit designedly, with a few intermediate or secondary pauses,

with ample modulation, and the final resolution to the normal movement for the close.

In his rhyme scheme Milton adheres strictly to the Petrarchan system. The first eight lines—the octave—never vary in their rhyme arrangement, as in the Italian model. The first, fourth, fifth, and eighth lines rhyme together, while the second rhymes with the third, sixth, and seventh lines. Thus there are always only two rhymes in the octave. This scheme may be indicated by the formula *a b b a a b b a*. The remaining six lines—the sestet—are arranged differently in different sonnets, either on two rhymes or on three. Nine sonnets out of a total of eighteen have two rhyme-sounds only in their sestet, seven rhyming *c d c d c d*, and the remaining two rhyming *c d d c d c*. Of the sestets with three rhymes five have the symmetrical form *c d e c d e*, while out of the remaining four two have *c d e d c e*, one *c d c e e d* and another *c d d c e e*. There is, thus, only one sonnet, the last mentioned above, having the rhyme scheme *c d d c e e* in its sestet, the sonnet "To the Lord General Cromwell," which closes with a couplet. It should be borne in mind that any arrangement of rhymes which left the last two lines of a sonnet rhyming as a couplet was regarded with disfavour by Italian critics. The

reason for this is admirably stated by Pattison. He says: "The principle of the sonnet structure is continuity of thought and metre; the final couplet interrupts the flow, it stands out by itself as an independent member of the construction; the wave of emotion, instead of being carried on to an even subsidence, is abruptly checked and broken as against a barrier. While the conclusion should leave a sense of finish and completeness, it is necessary to avoid anything like epigrammatic point." It should be noted, however, that even in his single use of the final couplet Milton had a precedent in Dante and Petrarch, for in some of the former's sonnets is found the rhyme scheme *c d d d c c*, which appears casually in those of the latter also. And Milton was assuredly right in paying more attention to the actual practice of the poets themselves than to the rigid theories of the critics.

Several of his sonnets begin with an invocation or address. And they are, as we have already said, almost without exception dignified in style and exalted in tone. They are, in other words, odic in their manner and aim; while those of Shakespeare are often lyrical or elegiac. Milton's sonnets lack the supple and insinuating sweetness of Shakespeare's. They are wanting

also in Shakespeare's infinite tenderness and his sense of the world's brooding mystery. And they have none of that grace, liveliness, and sheer beauty which raises his quatorzains above those of every writer. But Milton gave the sonnet "his own high spirit of courage, strength and sincerity, and his own masterly cunning of craftsmanship." He gave it law and liberty. He gave it truth and wisdom. He gave it power and purity. He gave it the learning of the scholar, the fire of the patriot, the austerity of the saint, and 'the wrath divine' of the poet and the prophet. His sonnets are stamped with his puritanism, a refined and cultured puritanism which was never opposed to the good things and the joys of life. They reflect his musical and scholarly tastes, his temperate pleasures and his love of "such society as is quiet, wise, and good." "They give us," in the words of Bailey, "the high ideal with which he became a poet, the high patriotism which drew him into politics, and that sense, both for himself and for others, of life as a thing to be lived in the presence and service of God, which was the eternally true part of his religion."

Milton's literary life falls naturally into four periods: the college period, closing with the end of his Cambridge career in 1632; the Horton



period, closing with his departure for the Continent in 1639 ; the period of his prose pamphlets, from 1640 to 1660 ; and the last poetic period, the period of his greatest achievement, in which he wrote *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes*. His sonnets fall into several chronological groups. Six of them, "To the Nightingale" and the five Italian sonnets with the Canzone were the product of his last years at the Cambridge university. The sonnet, beginning with the line, "How soon hath Time, the subtle thief of youth," was composed on his having arrived at the age of twenty-three in 1631. Therefore, this also belongs to the college period of Milton's career, and is the finest of its group. The sonnet, entitled "When the Assault was Intended to the City," was written in 1642 under the apprehension of a cavalier attack on London. Two sonnets, the one addressed to 'a virtuous young lady,' whose identity is unknown, and the other to Lady Margaret Ley, daughter of Sir James Ley who was Lord President of the Council, were composed in 1644. This whole group of ten sonnets, Italian and English combined, was published consecutively in the first edition of Milton's poems, which appeared in 1645. The remaining fourteen sonnets were written between

1645 and 1658. The concluding sonnet, written in memory of his second wife, thus immediately preceded his commencement of *Paradise Lost*. Four of these sonnets, one addressed to the Lord General Fairfax, another to Cromwell, the third to Sir Henry Vane, the younger, and the fourth to Cyriac Skinner, the second of the two sonnets addressed to the same, were not included in the edition of 1673 on account of their political tone. They were published in 1694 by the poet's nephew, Edward Phillips. Thus, with the exception of two pieces, the Nightingale sonnet and the Birthday sonnet, all the sonnets of Milton, written in English, were composed in the third period of his career, a period of about twenty years, in which, but for these sonnets wholly forsaken by his Muse, he was immersed in the dust and toil of political conflict, using his mighty pen and his extraordinary erudition and eloquence to defend the cause of Liberty, civil and religious, and to annihilate her adversaries. They bridged the interval between the two greatest periods of Milton's poetic activity, the Horton period and the last period, "dotting", in the beautiful words of the late Prof. Saintsbury, "the twenty dark years with spots of light." They are, however, not altogether free from the evil spirit of his prose pamphlets. In the second

sonnet, for instance, on the detraction which followed the publication of his divorce treatises, he writes in a vein which reminds us of the angry scurrility of his prose pamphlets :

“I did but prompt the age to quit their clogs  
By the known rules of ancient liberty,  
When straight a barbarous noise environs me  
Of owls and cuckoos, asses, apes, and dogs.”

But even here Milton's irrepressible gift of melodious and majestic phrase shows itself, as in the line—

“Which after held the sun and moon in fee.”

Besides, this sonnet has an importance of its own, in as much as it indicates in brief Milton's conception of Liberty. Liberty is for him not license as it is for the thoughtless multitude who bawl for freedom not out of clear knowledge but out of senseless ignorance. Liberty is for him the outcome of Truth ; and they that love it must first be wise and good. He was one of the greatest champions of freedom that England ever saw. As Augustine Birrell says in *Obiter Dicta*, Cromwell was the body and Milton the soul of English Republicanism.

The four finest of his sonnets are those on his Blindness, on the Massacre in Piedmont, on Cromwell, and that on his deceased wife. But that on his twenty-third birth-day, the one addressed to Lawrence, and the first of those addressed to Skinner, and "When the Assault was Intended to the City" come very near the best. Three of these pieces, the Assault Sonnet, the Lawrence sonnet, and the Skinner sonnet, besides being excellent specimens of their kind, have a special interest of a rather academic nature attached to them ; they are all written in the manner of the classical poet, Horace. The first is an imaginary petition in the characteristic style of the great Latin lyrist. The second recalls in manner and matter alike Horace's twelfth Ode in Book fourth, which is an invitation to his friend, Virgil, the greatest epic poet of the ancient Romans. Classical idioms and constructions are imitated with admirable skill without any violence to native English speech. Notice, for instance, the inversions in "Of virtuous father virtuous son," and "what may be won from the hard season gaining." Observe also the Latin poetical idiom "spare to interpose" and the use in "not unwise" of the classical figure, Litotes, which expresses a strong affirmation made indirectly by the negation of its

contrary, so that "not unwise" is a deliberate under-statement for the superlative "eminently wise." In order that the student may realise the affinity, both in manner and matter, of this sonnet with that Ode of Horace, just referred to, in which the poet invites Virgil to supper on condition that he brings with him some spikenard, we give below a mixed rendering of the same :

"The Thrasian breezes, companions of the Spring, now temper the raging seas and fill the sails with Etesian wing. The meadows are no longer stiff with frost and the late-raging rivers flow now with noiseless course. Even the unhappy bird, swallow, that bemoans the fate of Itys and is the eternal disgrace of Cecrop's race, now builds her cosy nest. And

'The shepherd, stretched on tender herbage, trills  
Strains like his mountains wild and free,  
Charming the God who haunts those pine-dark  
hills,

And loves the peaceful flocks of Arcady.  
Thirst comes with Summer : Virgil haste,  
Comrade of noble youths, and taste  
Choice wines of Cales : my reward  
One little shell of Cyrian nard.

The mellowed cask long-stored within  
The depths of the Sulpician bin  
Shall then be thine, that nectar rare  
Which brightens hope and drowns dull care.'

"To which joys if you hasten, come instantly with your merchandise ; I do not intend to dip you in my cups scotfree, like a man of wealth in a house abounding with plenty. However, lay aside delay, and the desire of gain ; and mindful of the gloomy funeral flames, intermix, while you may, your grave studies with a little light gaiety : it is delightful to give a loose on a proper occasion."

'Hence, sordid cares ! Hence idle sorrow !  
Death comes apace : to-day—to-morrow—  
Then mingle with mirth thine melancholy ;  
Wisdom at times is found in folly.'

The sonnet addressed to Skinner is another Horatian invitation. Like the preceding it expresses Milton's love of moderate pleasures. The line—

"And what the Swede intend and what the  
French"—

is a close imitation of a well-known passage in the eleventh ode, Book Second, of Horace:—

“Let warlike Spain and Scythia rave !  
What care we Quintins ? Ocean’s wave  
Bars them from us. For golden store  
Fret those that list. Our toils are o’er.  
Few are our wants.....  
All things decline : in sun or shade  
Fair flowers of Spring bloom but to fade :  
The full-orbed Moon that crimson rose,  
Waning, with pallid lustre glows.  
Why then consume our little life  
In vast designs, and endless strife ?  
Why not at ease beneath this pine  
Quaff we the rich Falernian wine ?  
Bacchus drowns within the bowl  
Troubles that corrode the soul.”

Milton’s sonnets are, like the Odes of Horace, perfect wholes, wrought complete. “They have their regular movement from a quiet beginning through a rising and breaking wave of passion and splendour to a quiet close. His art is nowhere better seen than in his endings,” not only of his sonnets, but of his other poems as well. In contrast with this, we may say here in passing that the final couplets in Shakespeare’s sonnets, as has

been pointed out by Prof. Egerton Smith, are lamentably weak and even paltry.

Now, on account of the obvious resemblances between these sonnets of Milton and certain well-known odes of Horace, it was pointed out by the late Poet Laureate, Robert Bridges, that Milton in his sonnets was deliberately adapting the sonnet-form to the Horatian ode. And, following in the footsteps of Bridges, Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch argues that, because Milton was labouring to make the sonnet a vehicle for the Horatian ode, he rejected the Shakespearean form with its three quatrains and a rhymed distich coming at the end as a *clou* of the whole, for this epigrammatic *clou* of all things Milton wished to avoid; and that, wisely preferring the Petrarchan form, he yet made the curious innovation of running octave and sestet together into a continuous strain, ridding it thereby of all clinches, and letting the rhymes come unobtrusively, and letting the verse run on, as in the Horatian model, like a brook, as he says. Let me frankly confess here that I have all along been an ardent, though humble, admirer of the author of "The Testament of Beauty." He was not only one of the finest creative artists but also a scholar of vast erudition in recent times. And for Prof. Quiller-Couch I



entertain feelings of the profoundest respect ; he is one of the most delightful critics of the day, and his opinions, particularly on poetry, are deserving of the most careful consideration. I regret, however, to say that in regard to this issue that has been raised, I do not see eye to eye with Bridges and Prof. Quiller-Couch. While there are, of course, undoubted similarities of style and substance between these sonnets of Milton and some odes of Horace, I do not believe that Milton was endeavouring, as the Professor says, to break up the Petrarchan sonnet and refit it to the Horatian ode. I feel that on the basis of a few sonnets we are not justified in making such a sweeping generalisation. Besides, as we have already shown, the so-called curious innovation of running octave and sestet together into a continuous strain was nothing new. It was fully known to the Italian masters of the sonnet. All that we need bear in mind in connection with this controversy is that Milton was following in the structure of his sonnets not so much the model of Petrarch as of Dante, Tasso, and above all, of Giovanni della Casa, who was, as we have already said, particularly fond of overflow and internal pauses, and a copy of whose sonnets Milton had in his possession. All that the few Horatian echoes

in his sonnets mean to us is what has already been noted by every critic of the poet, namely, that he is the greatest exemplar of the classic style in the long bead-roll of English poets. He was one of the profoundest classical scholars of his day, and passages which are reminiscent of the thought and style of ancient masters such as Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, and Virgil, Horace, Catullus, and Ovid, and several others, are naturally met with here and there in his work, though everything that he borrows is stamped with the unmistakable hall-mark of his own majestic personality.

We resume our comment on the eight best, or almost so, sonnets of Milton. Of the sonnet composed on his twenty-third birth-day we have already said the necessary words. All that we need add here is that it shows how Milton's mind was "set wholly on the accomplishment of greatest things," even when he was pretty young in years. The sonnet, written on the death of his second wife, Catherine Woodcock, who died in child-bed of a daughter within a year of her marriage, takes the form of a vision, suggested perhaps by Raleigh's graceful sonnet called "A vision upon the concept of the Faerie Queene," which begins thus :—

"Methought I saw the grave where Laura lay."

It is a very touching sonnet, and is remarkable for its profound pathos. It has two final clinching lines in the Shakespearean manner, although they are not in couplet form. The last line is epigrammatic, depending for its force on its paradoxical nature. We should not say, therefore, that Milton absolutely avoids the epigrammatic clinches of Shakespeare. In the sonnet to Cromwell he even uses the Shakespearean final couplet :

“Help us to save free conscience from the paw  
Of hireling wolves, whose gospel is their maw.”

This is the sonnet which contains the oft-quoted lines :—

“Peace hath her victories  
No less renowned than War : new foes arise,  
Threatening to bind our souls with secular  
chains.”

The poem is an appeal to Cromwell not to establish a paid ministry, one of the points of public policy on which Milton felt most deeply, and on which he differed from the policy adopted by the Protector. After a eulogy of his military achievements he asks him to turn his attention to new foes,

namely, the avaricious and self-seeking clergy who would sacrifice religious liberty for their own advantage. Observe the tremendous effect produced by the pause which comes after "And Worcester's laureate wreath." "On the Late Massacre in Piedmont" is a soul-animating strain which in respect of its majestic severity may be compared to one of the collects, or short prayers, peculiar to the liturgies of the Western Church, which consist of a single sentence and convey one main petition. It reminds us, in the words of Mark Pattison, of a Hebrew psalm, with its undisguised outburst of rage, revenge, or exultation, where nothing is due to art or artifice, and whose poetry is the expression of the heart, and not a branch of literature. It is in this sonnet that we realise the truth of Wordsworth's striking phrase, "The thing became a *trumpet* in his hand," and also of his image—"Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea." The frequency of run-on lines gives it a very powerful fluency, and well suggests the quivering passion which engendered it. Palgrave, the prince of anthologists, calls it the most mighty sonnet known to him in any language. The striking predominance of the open-mouthed vowel *o* suggests the large baritone or rolling reverberation of an angry sea. The sonnet on his

blindness is, in our opinion, the best of all. It is one of the most moving sonnets in the language, and is also distinguished by a spirit of noble resignation and patient humility. It is remarkable for its direct assertion of the doctrine of "living" as against that of "doing;" and, as such, it is frankly didactic. And didactic poetry is the lowest kind of poetry. But this is a splendid exception, because the poet is far more intent on learning the lesson himself than on inculcating it to others. The poem is a human document and reveals the spiritual struggle in Milton's own soul. It embodies a rare beauty and exaltation of moral feeling and takes the reader's heart captive for ever. It has a naked, unadorned simplicity of language, with none of the old conventions and ornaments, Petrarchan or Elizabethan. Two lines are wholly monosyllabic, while several others are nearly so. Milton lost his eyesight as a result of his excessive work in the cause of liberty. He was warned by his physician, but, as he says, "I could not listen to the physician." There was a more insistent and an infinitely more powerful monitor, the inward monitor, "that spake to me from heaven," whom "I could not but obey." And, therefore, he decided to do "the greatest service to the common weal it was in my power to render," the service of

defending the English people against the denunciations of the Dutch scholar, Salmasius, who was employed by Prince Charles (now in exile, to which he was driven by the execution of his father, King Charles I, at the hands of the Republicans) to denounce the regicides and advocate the old doctrine of the divine right of kings. As against this, Milton was all along an ardent champion of the people and of their inherent rights, so much so, indeed, that on account of the excessive work which a constant defence of civil liberty involved he lost his eyes, "lost them overplied in liberty's defence, my noble task," as he says in the second sonnet addressed to Skinner. Milton's inherent nobility of soul never declares itself more gloriously than in this sonnet on his blindness.

A word about the versification of Milton's sonnets. Let us concentrate our attention for that purpose upon this sonnet on his blindness. For the convenience of the student we give it below :—

"When I consider how my light is spent  
Ere half my days in this dark world and wide,  
And that one talent which is death to hide  
Lodged with me useless, though my soul more  
bent

To serve therewith my Maker, and present  
My true account, lest He returning chide,—  
'Doth God exact day-labour, light denied ?'  
I fondly ask. But Patience, to prevent  
That murmur, soon replies, 'God doth not need  
Either man's work or His own gifts : who best  
Bear His mild yoke, they serve Him best. His  
state  
Is kingly : thousands at His bidding speed  
And post o'er land and ocean without rest ;  
They also serve who only stand and wait.'

The prosody of Milton's sonnets, as has been already stated, is very much like that of his blank verse, though, of course, necessarily on an infinitely smaller scale. There is an ever-changing variety of pause. Pauses in English verse, besides the compensatory pause which occurs between two accented syllables and helps to fill up the time of a foot, are of two kinds : metrical pauses and sense pauses. Sense pauses are found in prose as well as in verse ; their function is to mark off phrases in the movement of thought. And they depend on the grammatical and rhetorical arrangement of words. The pauses which occur at the end of each line or verse are called metrical pauses. Their function is to mark off the units of secondary

rhythm, that is, lines. When the sense pauses fall at the end of lines, and so coincide with the metrical pauses, there is an obtrusive check to the rhythm, and such lines are called 'end-stopped' lines. Let us now look at the above sonnet. The sense pauses and the metrical pauses coincide only in the second, sixth, seventh, thirteenth, and fourteenth lines. In other words, there are only five end-stopped lines. All other lines overflow or run on into succeeding lines. The first line, for instance, runs on into the second, the third line runs on into the fourth which also runs on into the fifth which again runs on into the sixth, and so on. Out of fourteen lines of the sonnet there are thus five end-stopped lines and the remaining nine are 'run-on' lines, as they are called. This predominance of run-on lines gives the sonnet a remarkable continuity of rhythm. There are, however, many sense pauses in the middle of the lines. Out of a total of fourteen, again, nine lines have got these internal sense pauses. In the fourth line, for example, there is a sense pause after *useless*; in the fifth after *Maker*; in the sixth after *account*, and so on. In some lines, indeed, there are even two sense pauses, as in the eighth line, once after *ask* and again after *Patience*. These double sense pauses occur also in lines nine,



ten, and eleven. The sense pauses occur at various places inside the line, after the fifth syllable as in the fourth line, after the seventh syllable as in the fifth and the seventh lines, after the fourth syllable as in the sixth line, after the fourth and the seventh syllable as in the eighth line, after the fourth and the eighth syllable as in lines ten and eleven, after the third and the sixth syllable as in the ninth line, and after the third syllable as in the twelfth line. Note also that there are five lines without any internal sense pause, lines one, two, three, thirteen, and fourteen. From these details it is evident that Milton shows in his sonnets, as in his blank verse, a distinct preference for the pause after the sixth syllable, and then for that after the fourth ; next in favour are lines without pause, or with two pauses ; but pauses are allowed in all positions. There is thus an endless variety of pause accompanied by a no less varied overflow of sense from verse to verse. End-stopped lines are very rare. Hyper-metrical lines, or lines consisting of more than ten syllables are also extremely rare. Milton usually preserves the fixed number of syllables. Out of a total of two hundred and fifty-two lines of his sonnets in English, leaving apart his Tail-sonnet, there are only forty hyper-metrical lines. And in many

cases it is easy to reduce trisyllabic feet to disyllabic by slurring or elision, particularly when two vowel sounds come together, or are separated only by a liquid, *l*, *r*, or *n*. Here are a few examples :—

“Have linked *that amorous power* to thy soft lay.”

“The house of Pindarus, *when temple and tower.*”

“That labour up the hill *of heavenly Truth.*”

It is obvious, therefore, that the number of really hypermetrical lines is almost nil in his sonnets. In the sonnet we are considering there is not a single such line, every line containing the fixed number of syllables allowed in each verse of a sonnet, namely, ten.

The modulations that Milton makes on the pattern of the decasyllabic line are mainly of two kinds. By the dropping of stresses, and by the admission of *glide-anapaests*, the pace of the rhythm is quickened ; and an effect of ease and lightness is produced :

“To serve therewith my Maker *and présent.*”

“I fondly ask. But *Patience to prevent.*”

"To fill thy *ódorous lámp* with dèeds of líght."

By the doubling of stresses in the foot, or by their inversion the pace is retarded, and an effect of strength and emphasis is produced thereby. Here are two examples of double stresses in a foot. Such a foot is technically called a *spondee*, and its opposite, that is to say, a foot consisting of two unstressed syllables is called a *pyrrhic*. In the following two lines 'dark world' and 'more bent' are spondaic feet :

"Ere hálf my dáys in this *dárk wórld* and wide."

"Lódged with me úseless, thóugh my sóul  
*móre bént.*"

In the following verses the stress is inverted in the first foot, so that the accent instead of falling upon the second syllable falls upon the first, and a foot that is technically called a *trochee* is the result :

"*Eíther* man's work or His own gifts. Who best.

"*Bèar* his mild yoke, they serve him best.

His state."

'Man's work,' 'own gifts,' and 'mild yoke' in the above two lines are *spondees*. The presence of several spondaic feet in this sonnet gives it an air of great weight and deliberation.

Milton uses monosyllabic feet also, but only in combination with anapaests, and most frequently at the beginning of a line, for the metrical pause at the end of a verse facilitates the introduction of a monosyllabic foot.

Lódged|with me úse|less, thóugh|

Móve|by her twó|māin nérves|Ir'on|and góld|

Sláin|by the blóod-|y Piéd-|montése|that rólled|

We shall now mention some formal characteristics of the style of Milton's sonnets. The style of the sonnets, it may be said at once, is, on the whole, surprisingly simple in comparison with his other poems. They are free alike from the fantastic conceits of the Metaphysicals and the amorous affectations of the Elizabethans or of the Cavalier lyrists of the Restoration. They impress us not by their art but by their inspiration, their directness, and their sincerity.

As Mark Pattison rightly says: "Their very force and beauty consist in their being the momentary and spontaneous explosion of an emotion welling up from the depths of the soul, and forcing itself into metrical expression, as it were, in spite of the writer." Their syntax, or sentence-structure, however, is highly intricate and involved like all his other writings in verse or prose. Consider, for example, the construction of the first half of the sonnet on his blindness. How complex! There is one periodic sentence, but the principal clause 'I fondly ask' does not occur till the very end. The first six lines are adverbial clauses, themselves complex; and the seventh line is a noun clause, being the object of the main clause 'I fondly ask.' A skeleton outline will make the structure clearer:—

I. When I consider

(A) How my light is spent ere half my days in this dark world and wide.

(B) And how that one talent is lodged with me useless.

(a) Which is death to hide.

(b) Though my soul is more bent to serve therewith my Maker and present my true account.

(i) Lest He returning chide.

II. I fondly ask.

III. Doth God exact day-labour, light denied ?

Thus Milton often employs a series of subordinate clauses, co-ordinated or subordinated among themselves. The style is, in consequence, full of passages which are very tangled in construction. Elliptical phrases, absolute clauses, archaic words, and words used in their original Latin meaning, expressions reminiscent of classical writers, and Latin inversions are frequently met with. Classical allusions are found in almost every sonnet. All these factors have combined to make Milton one of the most difficult of English poets ; and a proper understanding of his work requires a vast amount of scholarship such as is not ordinarily possessed by men whose life is not lived with the poets. Mark Pattison's apposite remark that "an appreciation of Milton is the last reward of consummated scholarship" is applicable not only to *Paradise Lost* but also to the sonnets, though not to the same extent. On account of his frequent Latinisms it has been said that he attempted to impose upon the native genius of English an alien syntax and arrangement of words. But we should remember that Latin was for him

not a dead but a living language. Even Dr. Johnson did not think and write in it with greater ease.

It cannot be too often emphasized, however, that the solid bedrock of his style beneath all the crusts of Greek and Latin is made up of plain familiar words in their natural order :

“When I consider how my light is spent.”

“They also serve who only stand and wait.”

It is true that he was indebted, perhaps none more, to the classics in his thought and style alike, but he was, it appears to us, even more considerably and more profoundly influenced by the inestimable wealth of the Holy Bible. His heaviest debt is beyond doubt to that sacred Book ; and several sonnets bear unmistakable witness to this fact. The sonnet on his blindness alone contains, for example, two Biblical references, one to Christ’s parable of the talents in St. Mathew, chapter twenty-five, and the other to what Jesus said to his followers in the Gospel of St. John, chapter ninth—“I must work the works of Him that sent me, while it is day : the night cometh,

when no man can work." Milton's thought and language are thus shot through and through with the Bible.

Almost every competent critic of Milton has praised his sonnets with unstinted enthusiasm. But Dr. Johnson, who often failed to appreciate him, gives them slender commendation and says even of the best of them that "they are not bad," maintaining that "the fabric of a sonnet, however adapted to the Italian language, has never succeeded in ours, which, having greater variety of termination, requires the rhymes to be often changed." Milton's failure as a sonnet-writer was thus a foregone conclusion with the great critic; and he explained it by saying that "Milton was a genius that could cut a colossus from a rock, but could not carve heads upon cherry-stones." Nobody, of course, has ever claimed that his sonnets are absolutely flawless. They are unequal. They are sometimes harsh in their expression. They are at times obscure. Frequent classical allusions interfere with the sentiment. There is at times weak and defective rhyming. In the sonnet on Mrs. Catherine Thomson, for instance, 'God' is made to rhyme with 'load'. In one sonnet, indeed, the sonnet addressed to a virtuous young lady,



there is an example of identical rhymes : 'Ruth' is made to rhyme with 'ruth'. All these petty blemishes, however, as Hallam rightly says, are lost in the majestic simplicity and the holy calm which ennoble many of his sonnets. Milton is undoubtedly one of the few greatest practitioners of the Italian sonnet in England. We conclude this paper on his sonnets with a passage from Prof. R. D. Havens :—

"The sonnet has always in all languages shown a tendency towards sweetness rather than strength, towards finish rather than thought, towards pretty trifling and absorption in the single theme, love. Not only does this hold of Elizabethan times and the late eighteenth century, but it is the popular conception of the form in our own day. The tendency, if it had not constantly been met by powerful forces of another kind, would have greatly narrowed the scope of the sonnet, would have made it monotonous, have lessened the esteem in which practically all modern English poets have held it, and have deprived us of much noble verse. Without the salutary influence of Milton and his followers the sonnet might

have been devoted largely to what Johnson termed the carving of heads upon cherry-stones. This influence has been of the more permanent significance because, instead of being so decided as to suppress originality, it has only stimulated and given direction to it.....It is safe to say, then, not only that the sonnet was reborn under the influence of Milton and for many years kept subject almost solely to him, but that from the time of its birth to the very present it has carried his impress as it has that of no other poet."

"Homage to him

His debtor band, innumerable as waves  
Running all golden from an eastern sun,  
Joyfully render, in deep reverence  
Subscribe, and as they speak their Milton's  
name,

Rays of his glory on their foreheads bear."

*George Meredith.*

## THE LITERARY CAREER OF MILTON.

John Milton, the son of a prosperous scrivener, was born in London on the 9th of December, 1608, and died on the 8th of November, 1674. His literary career may be divided into four periods: the College period, the Horton period, the Prose-sonnet period, and the last period in which he wrote *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes*, and which, in absence of any better term, may be called the "Epic period" of Milton's career. An objection may be raised against this designation on the ground that *Samson Agonistes* is not an epic but a drama, pure and simple, modelled after the manner of the well-known Greek dramatist, Euripides. True; but, notwithstanding its unhappy ending, its want of stupendous bulk or proportion, and the absence of any supernatural element from it, *Samson Agonistes* may still be fairly called an "Epic drama," because in spirit and diction it is heroic to a degree and its action and characters are sufficiently sublime to deserve the distinction.

Milton's College period closes with the end of his Cambridge career in 1632. The poems

written in this period are in the nature of a young man's experimental work. They have hardly any importance except that they are an expression of Milton's genius in its immaturity. An exception, however, must be made in favour of the ode "On the Morning of Chirst's Nativity." Written in 1629 when the poet was only twenty-one, this "splendid and immortal piece," as Andrew Lang calls it, may, in point of harmony, challenge comparison with the best pieces of Spenser ; while, notwithstanding its frigid conceits, it is important as giving a foretaste of Milton's sublimity, as in "The trumpet spoke not to the armed throng" or referring to Christ—

"That glorious form, that light unsufferable,  
And that far-beaming blaze of majesty,  
Wherewith he wont at Heaven's high Council-  
table,

To sit the midst of Trinal Unity,  
He laid aside ; and, here with us to be,  
Forsook the courts of everlasting day,  
And chose with us a darksome house of  
mortal clay."

The Horton period of Milton's poetical career covers some seven years, from his leaving Cam-

bridge in 1632 to his departure for the continent in 1639. It is so called, because during this period Milton lived with his family in the country-house at Horton, Buckinghamshire, some seventeen miles from London. Though he was extremely sedulous in the study of classical books, Milton yet found time, during his residence at Horton, to compose four poems "of such beauty and power that, even if *Paradise Lost* had never been written, they would have sufficed to put their author high among the greater gods of English Song." They are *L'Allegro*, *Il Penseroso*, *Comus*, and *Lycidas*. *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* are exquisite lyrics in which Milton shows himself to be the veritable 'inventor of harmonies.' These twin idylls have been praised even by Dr. Johnson, 'the great Cham of literature,' who was otherwise so severe and ruthless in his criticism of Milton. *L'Allegro* is one of the most delightful lyrics in English literature, written as it is in the buoyant spirit of youthful gladness. It is undisfigured by any trace of Melancholy

"Of cerberus and blackest midnight born,  
In stygian caves forlorn."

It is, on the other hand, full of

“heart-easing mirth,  
Whom lovely Venus at a birth.  
With two sister Graces more,  
To ivy-crownéd Bacchus bore,”

with all her train of

“Jest and youthful jollity,  
Quips, and Cranks, and Wanton Wiles,  
Nods, and Becks, and wreathed Smiles,  
Such as hang on Hebe’s cheek,  
And love to live in dimple sleek ;  
Sport that wrinkled Care derides,  
And Laughter holding both his sides.”

*Il Penseroso* is written in a mood of gravity, but the metre, the rhythm, and the diction are so enchanting that the reader is simply captivated—captivated by music—

“Such as the meeting soul may pierce,  
In notes with many a winding bout,  
Of linked sweetness long drawn out,  
With wanton heed and giddy cunning,  
The melting voice through mazes running,  
Untwisting all the chains that tie  
The hidden soul of harmony ;

That Orpheus self may heave his head  
From golden slumber on a bed  
Of heaped Elysian flowers, and hear  
Such strains as would have won the ear  
Of Pluto, to have quite set free  
His half-regain'd Euridice."

It is important to bear in mind that in Milton's work the moral and religious influences of Puritanism were blended with the generous culture of the Renaissance. Hitherto Milton's poetry had been but the expression of the spirit of Renaissance with its keen sense of beauty and its intense delight in all the good things of life. But with *Comus* we mark a distinct stage in the growth of Milton's mind. His puritan spirit now manifests itself in the earnest didacticism of *Comus*. Its simple story of the lady lost in the woods, lured away by Comus and his band of revellers, and rescued by her brothers with the help of an attendant Spirit and the river Nymph is an obvious allegory of virtue attacked by sensuality and rescued by divine aid. On the formal and literary side, however, this work also belongs to the Renaissance, for it is an example, and the finest example in the English language, of that type of drama which is called the Mask, which had been

brought into England from Italy, and had ever been extremely popular at court and among the nobility. Finally, *Lycidas* is a monody on the death of Milton's college friend, Edward King; and it is, like Spenser's *Astrophel*, written in the conventional style of the classical pastoral elegy. In form, therefore, it belongs with *Comus* to the Renaissance; but Milton's puritanism is unmistakably evident not only in the deep religious accent of the poem but also in his famous open attack upon the corrupt church and the hireling clergy of the time—

“Such as for their bellies’ sake  
Creep, and intrude, and climb into the fold,  
Of other care they little reckoning make,  
Than how to scramble at the shearer’s feast,  
And shove away the worthy bidden guest.”

By virtue of its high poetic inspiration *Lycidas* is justly spoken of as being “the high water-mark of English poesy.”

The Prose-sonnet period of Milton extends over a space of about twenty years from 1640 to 1660. In this period Milton was busy in writing pamphlets on education, on marriage, and on



divorce, pamphlets in defence of Puritanism, and pamphlets, lastly, on republican themes. Milton's prose works are not very interesting in themselves, nor do they make very agreeable reading. Though there are here and there splendid bursts of eloquence and noble earnestness, they are yet, on the whole, disfigured by want of taste, coarseness of phrase, and bitterness of feeling. The style, which is heavy and cumbrous, is marred by long trailing sentences, involved constructions, parentheses, and Latin inversions. Milton himself said that his prose writings were the work of his "left hand"; and we can learn from almost every page that his left hand did not possess the cunning of his right. There is, however, one treatise which stands altogether apart—the good and noble *Areopagitica*. Dr. Warton spoke of it as being "the most close, conclusive, comprehensive, and decisive vindication of the liberty of the press which has yet appeared."

Written during the scant intervals of peace from the heat and din of public life, the Sonnets of Milton, though few, being only eighteen in number, excluding, of course, the Latin ones, deserve all praise. They are, in Wordsworth's words, "Soul-animating strains", welling up from

the depths of Milton's passionate soul. It is in them that we realise the force of Wordsworth's image—

“Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like  
the sea.”

They are also historically important in as much as they revived the Italian sonnet in English, and introduced a new element, dealing as they are with what is called “Occasional Poetry” or themes of all sorts that suggest themselves to the poet's mind on the occasion, as distinct from amorous topics with which alone the earlier sonnet-writers had bound up their interest.

The Restoration of Charles, the Second, to the throne of England and the fall of the puritan cause constrained Milton to seek solitude from a world in which he was no longer held in esteem. Not to speak of respect; he was treated even with positive contumacy. Remote from the distractions of public life, Milton now set to work for the realisation of that ambition which he had long entertained from his early youth, namely, the composition of “a poem which should bring honour to his country and native tongue.”

*Paradise Lost*, one of the few universal epics of the world, published in 1667, was the result. This colossal poem, which is divided into twelve books containing altogether 66383 lines, treats

“Of Man’s first disobedience and the fruit  
Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste  
Brought death into the world and all our woe,  
With loss of Eden, till one greater Man  
Restore us and regain the blissful seat.”

Its object is to

“assert Eternal Providence  
And justify the ways of God to Men.”

*Paradise Lost* is recognised by almost every critic as “the noblest product of human imagination.” Its ring is sublimity ; its atmosphere,

“Truth, wisdom, sanctitude severe and pure ;”

and its texture is almost unbounded learning, but learning that is always under the plastic control of the poet’s imagination. Comparing Homer, Dante, and Milton, the world’s three greatest epic poets, Dryden writes with evident truth—

“Three poets in three distant ages born,  
Greece, Italy, and England did adorn,  
The first in loftiness of thought surpass’d  
The next in majesty ; in both the last :  
The force of Nature could no further go,  
To make the third she’d joined the former  
two.”

Though in theory an epic poem is supposed to be quite impersonal, Milton’s *Paradise Lost* is throughout instinct with the lofty spirit of the man himself. It is also important as being the highest achievement in blank verse, and is rich in a “keen translunar music” and marvellous variety, so that what Knapp writes in his *Epistle To Mr. Pope, on his “Windsor Forest”* is applicable to Milton with even greater force—

“With vast variety thy pages shine,  
A new creation starts in ev’ry line.”

A certain Quaker of the name of Ellwood to whom Milton had presented his *Paradise Lost*, is reported to have said, when asked by the poet to give his opinion on the great epic : “Well, you have written much about paradise lost but what about paradise regained ?” The interrogation struck

home, and *Paradise Regained*, published in 1671, was the outcome. Unlike *Paradise Lost* which, in point of ornamentation, ranks equal with Claudian's *Rape of Proserpine*, one of the richest and most elaborate poems ever written, *Paradise Regained* is marked throughout

“By that simplicity which is sublime.”

It celebrates the coming of Christ on earth

“To conquer sin and death, the two grand foes  
By humiliation and strong sufferance.”

The average man has found fault with the “nakedness,” the “frigidity,” and the “jejuneness” of the poem, but, if the present writer be allowed to give his opinion for what it is worth, it is the most finished and the most natural poem of Milton. Nor is this view wanting in support from high authority ; for it is confirmed by the judgment of a poet like Wordsworth and a critic like Coleridge. The former thought it to be “the most perfect in execution of anything written by Milton” ; and the latter spoke of it in the same strain, declaring that “in its kind it is the most perfect poem extant.”

*Samson Agonistes*, published in the same year as *Paradise Regained*, is a tragedy written, as has already been mentioned, after the classical model of the well-known Greek dramatist, Euripides. From the point of view of poetic composition we agree with Pattison that the drama is "languid, nerveless, occasionally palling, never brilliant." We feel as if the ebb tide of Milton's genius has set in. Indeed, he himself says :

"I feel my genial spirits droop,  
My hopes all flat, nature within me seems  
In all her functions weary of herself."

*Samson Agonistes.*

But from the view-point of the strong personal accent with which the tragedy is pervaded it is pregnant with meaning, full of fresh interest, and surcharged with profound pathos. The story of the blind Samson, once a mighty man, but now fallen on evil days and imprisoned, tormented, and insulted by his foes at Gaza, through the faithlessness of his Philistine spouse, bears, if not a close, at least a general resemblance to the life of Milton himself. In the character of Delila it pleases our fancy to find a counterpart of Milton's first wife, Mary Powell, a Roman Catholic, who

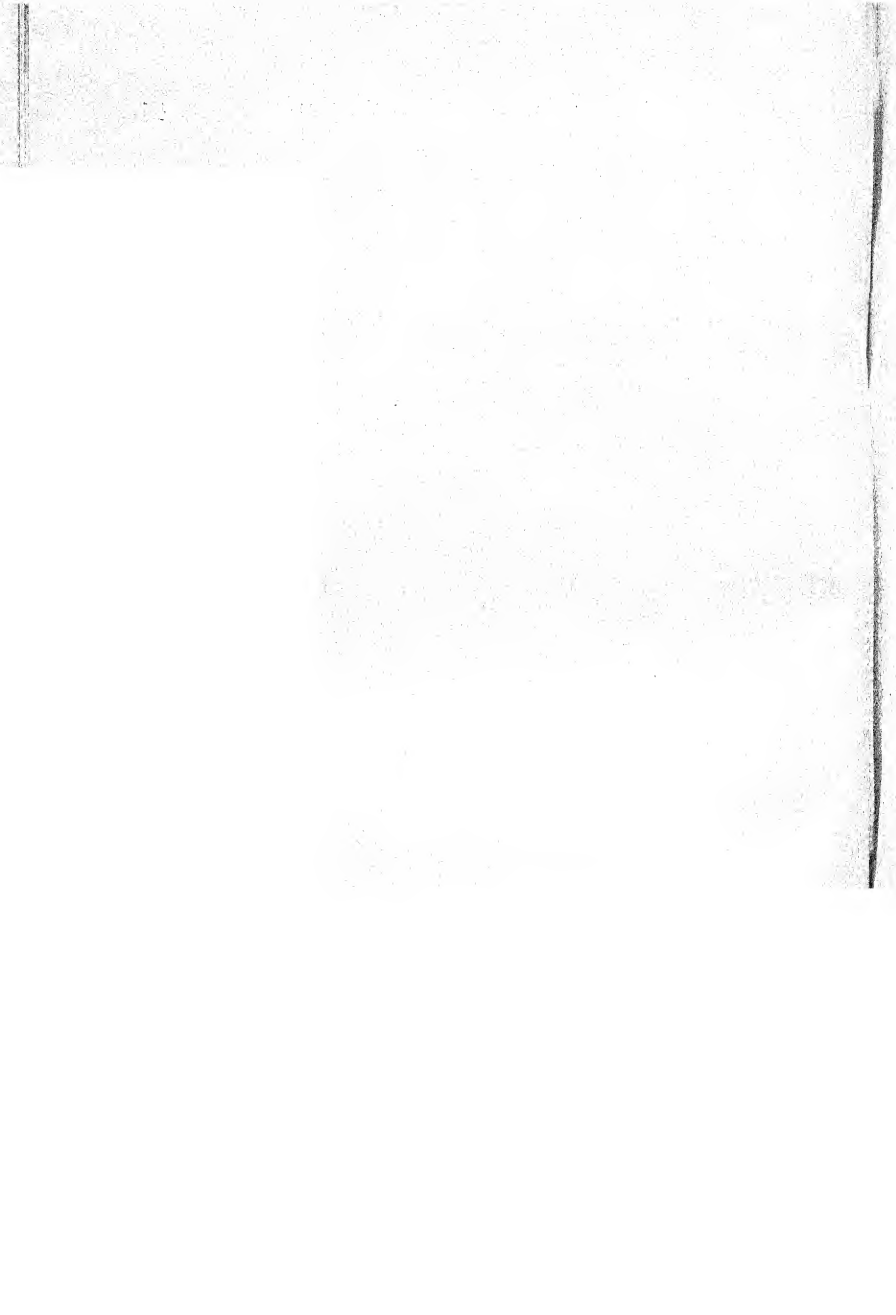
had caused much domestic woe to Milton in his early life. In respect of the profound pathos of *Samson Agonistes* it is enough to say, in the words of Mark Pattison, that it is "the intensest utterance of the most intense of English poets."

Three years after the publication of his *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes* Milton died of the 'gout struck in.' The funeral was attended, as Toland says, "by all his learned and great friends in London, not without a friendly concourse of the vulgar." But why should we speak of Milton in the language of the grave? He is not dead ; he has gone

"Back to the burning fountain whence he came,  
A portion of the Eternal, which must glow  
Through time and change unquenchably the  
same ;"

and

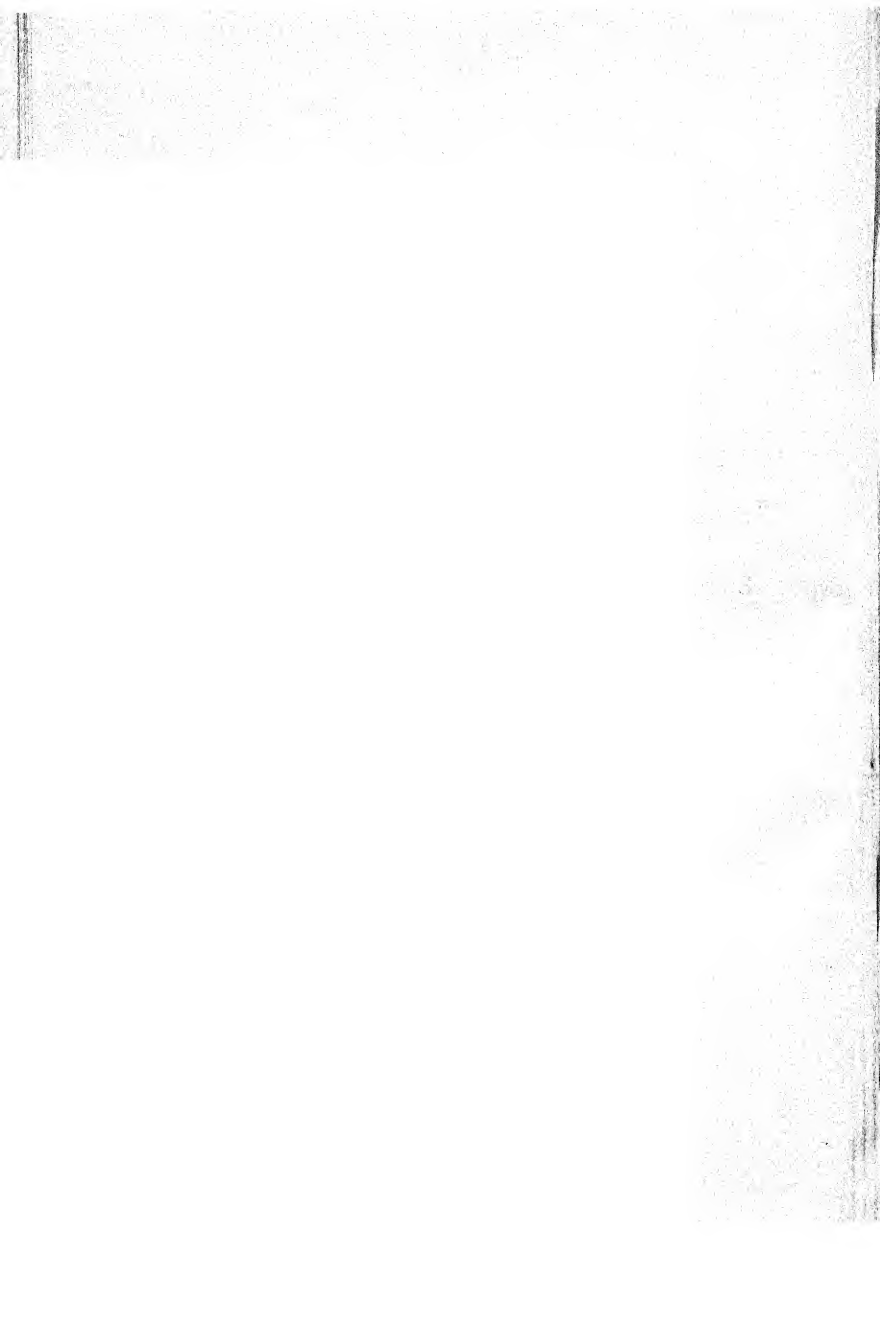
"his clear sprite  
Yet reigns o'er earth, the third among the sons  
of light."





## THE POETRY OF WORDSWORTH.

"Time may restore us in his course  
Goethe's sage mind and Byron's force,  
But where will Europe's latter hour  
Again find Wordsworth's healing power?"  
Matthew Arnold : *Memorial Verses.*



## THE POETRY OF WORDSWORTH.

It is worth while at the very outset to observe that the poetry of Wordsworth was of the nature of a deliberate protest, a protest against the thin pale sentiment, the frigid conceits, and the gorgeous, inane phraseology of the Augustan poets. It was an attempt to do away with that conventionalism which beset the poetry of the Classical period in English Literature. At first, it was received with a storm of ridicule, because it ran counter to the popular tastes. Men had been wont to appreciate the fine-moulded couplets and the stinging epigrams of Pope; they had been accustomed to relish the formal and pompous ways of city-bred aristocrats; they had been habituated to applaud the mere external, decorative, and architectonic aspects of poetry: but Wordsworth disappointed them in all these respects; for he was not a purveyor to established tastes but a shaping and compelling force, a pure and powerful light thrown on the dark places of changeful human experience. When, however, people grew surfeited with the glittering wit, the ingenious fancy, and the gaudy diction of poets of the eighteenth century, there arose, upon the heels of this satiety, an eager craving in

the hearts of men for a living voice and a natural tone, which were given them in abundance by Wordsworth, around whom, therefore, there gathered now a world of admirers, so zealous in their devotion that they even sought to vindicate the obvious faults of their Master.

The language which Wordsworth chose as a medium to pour forth his soul is amazingly simple, so much so, indeed, that some critics have even gone to the length of calling it bald or barren. Well, we acknowledge that his expression is frequently so plain, so naked, and so austere that it may be regarded as a little bald, but then, as Matthew Arnold rightly observes, "it is bald as the bare mountain tops are bald, with a baldness which is full of grandeur." This simplicity of diction was, in fact, a deliberate design with Wordsworth ; not that he could not command a florid and embellished style in which poetry is usually dressed, for in his Ode on Immortality and his most Virgilian poem, *Laodamia*, as well as elsewhere in several scattered places, he has furnished ample proof of the fact that he was capable of wielding the most magnificent language that Poesy ever employed in her service. Indeed, Wordsworth's chief distinction was that he had an equal command over two

distinct modes of expression : the aristocratic manner of English poetry and the democratic manner of plain, inornate diction. As a rule, he uses a severely simple form of expression ; but, at times, in spite of himself as it were, his ideas are couched in a style which is as resonant in cadence and as splendid in phrasing as anything in the English grand manner. We should bear in mind, however, that for Wordsworth poetry was not a gay coquette whose purpose is merely to flirt awhile with her suitors and then jilt them in the long run with scorn, but

“A perfect Woman, nobly planned,  
To warn, to comfort, and command.”

“To console the afflicted ; to add sunshine to daylight by making the happy happier ; to teach the young and the gracious of every age to see, to think, and feel, and therefore to become more actively and securely virtuous”—this is his own account of the purpose of his poetry. Wordsworth held with Cowley that “Truth is truest poesy.” And with Bacon he maintained that “No pleasure is comparable to the standing upon the vantage-ground of truth.” Of course, the chief end of poetry is pleasure ; but, then, there are so many

different roads that lead to this Rome; and Wordsworth chose for his career as a poet the secure Highway of Truth. But Truth is Beauty; and Beauty, he was convinced, does not stand in need of any poetical embellishment or ornament, but is, when unadorned, adorned the most. It is here that we touch the inner secret of that surprising simplicity which marks the poetic diction of Wordsworth; and the world, it should seem, is immensely fortunate in that. For, if he had adopted a highly-coloured, tessellated, and recondite mode of utterance, few could have approached his lofty message, dealing as he was for the most part with that transcendental world which had swum into his ken through his quiet contemplation of Nature.

One of the aims of Wordsworth was to reform the poetic diction of his day, and to bring about the accomplishment of this desired end he recommended the language of common life for poetical purposes. He did not, of course, succeed in substituting the language of common life for poetic diction, but he did a much better thing. He emancipated it from that unnatural pomp and circumstance which had long corrupted it; he set it coursing along the normal channels of

thought and speech ; he made it more intimate and nerved it with the elements of strength and dignity, purity and truth, united with subtle thought and tender sensibility. "He dug deep into the ore of manly thoughts, and finding there a corresponding tongue, both new and true, he blew away the dry dust of conventionalities and affectations, and replaced a false poetic diction by a genuine one." Personifications of abstract ideas, to which Pope and his followers resorted as a mechanical and habitual contrivance to elevate their style, are rarely met with in his poetry : they are used only when they are prompted by passion. All gross and violent stimulants are religiously avoided ; all extraordinary incidents and outrageous sentiments are scrupulously eschewed ; all vulgar emotions and voluptuous sensations are rigidly excluded. He looks steadily at his subject ; consequently, his poems are absolutely free from falsehood of description : they are, indeed, the very emanations of reality and truth. It is the feeling therein developed which gives importance to the action and situation, and not the action and situation to the feeling. Poetry is for Wordsworth not a mere matter of amusement and idle pleasure : it is, like love, a passion ; it is, like religion, a protection against the pressure of trivial employ-

ments and a consolation for the afflictions of life ; it is like a morning star which throws its radiance through the gloom and shadow of death. He agrees with Aristotle that Poetry is the most philosophic of all writing, and adds that it is so, because "its object is truth, not individual and local, but general and operative ; not standing upon external testimony, but carried alive into the heart by passion ; truth which is its own testimony, which gives competence and confidence to the tribunal to which it appeals, and receives them from the same tribunal." Poetry is for him "the image of man and nature." It is "the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge ; it is the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all Science." "Poetry," he says, "is the first and last of all knowledge—it is as immortal as the heart of man." It is on account of this sublime conception of poetry that Wordsworth never breaks in upon the truth and sanctity of his pictures by transitory and accidental ornaments, that he never endeavours to excite admiration of himself by arts, the necessity of which must manifestly depend upon the assumed meanness of his subject. Wordsworth is "a dedicated spirit." He is a sublime teacher, a serene prophet who is ever conscious of his high mission and who holds himself in



sacred responsibility for its fulfilment. He says himself :—"I wish either to be considered as a teacher or as nothing at all." It is in consequence of this attitude on the part of Wordsworth that his poetry is pre-eminently characterised by didacticism. No phenomenon is touched but is moralised upon withal. The woodland linnet and the throstle are not only sweet songsters who delight our senses with their dulcet music, but also sublime preachers who elevate the soul with their splendid sermons. Taking a retrospective glance of the river Duddon and finding it still flowing as it did in days gone by, Wordsworth who has been justly called "the Moralist," writes beautifully thus :

"Still glides the Stream, and shall for ever glide ;  
The Form remains, the Function never dies ;  
While we, the brave, the mighty, and the wise,  
We Men, who in our morn of youth defied  
The elements, must vanish :—be it so !  
Enough, if something from our hands have power  
To live, and act, and serve the future hour ;  
And if, as toward the silent tomb we go,  
Through love, through hope, and faith's  
transcendent dower,  
We feel that we are greater than we know."

It is for such weighty utterances of moral truth that we so much value to-day the poetry of Wordsworth. But what is even more important than this is the fact that, like all the best teachers of the world, Wordsworth climbs beyond teaching to the plane of art. He does not inculcate any dogma which is at best only a new error; he communicates a spirit which is a perpetual possession. It is himself, and what is best in himself, that he communicates. That is why "every one", as Stevenson says, "has been influenced by Wordsworth. A certain innocence, a rugged austerity of joy, a sight of the stars, 'the silence that is in the lonely hills,' something of the cold thrill of dawn, cling to his work and give it a particular address to what is best in us. You need not agree with any one of his beliefs; and yet the spell is cast." While, on the one hand, he is the poet of unpoetical natures, of minds possessed of quiet and contemplative tastes; on the other, he is in a certain real sense the poets' poet, singing, as he does, of "the light that never was on sea or land."

The poetry of Wordsworth has an almost magical power of soothing the mind that is agitated by the fever and the fret of the world. Mill's

testimony to this effect is recorded in his *Autobiography*. He writes: "From them (Wordsworth's poems) I seemed to learn what would be the perennial sources of happiness, when all the greater evils of life shall have been removed. And I felt myself at once better and happier as I came under their influence." William Watson also in *Wordsworth's Grave*, one of his greatest critical elegies, adds his verdict thus :

"Rest ! 'twas the gift he gave ; and peace ! the shade  
He spread, for spirits fevered with the sun."

In his *Memorial Verses* Matthew Arnold also speaks of "Wordsworth's healing power." These illustrious witnesses will, it is hoped, convince every one of the assuaging power of Wordsworth's poetry ; but if there be some non-believers still left, let them drink deep at the poet's own Pierian spring and watch the effect on themselves. This aspect of his poetry is, in fact, acknowledged even by his hostile critics. Judging from a superficial view, however, they attribute it to a supposed coldness of disposition on the part of our poet. They forget that all his feelings and affections were fearfully strong, so much so, indeed, that if his intellect had been less powerful, they must have

shattered him long before the actual date of his demise. The characteristic calm of Wordsworth's poetry, then, is not the result of any want of passion on his part; it is, on the contrary, paradoxical though it may sound, the very culmination of emotion. His poetry is like the potter's wheel which, though apparently quiet and motionless, is nevertheless rotating, in reality, with the utmost possible speed. It is impassioned.

Impassioned? ay, to the song's ecstatic core!

But far removed from clangour, storm, and feud,  
For plenteous health was his, exceeding store  
Of joy, and an impassioned quietude.

William Watson: *Wordsworth's Grave*.

It is this impassioned quietude which distinguishes Wordsworth from all other poets in English literature. It is the outcome partly of his peculiar method of composition and partly also of that spirit of harmony which he had been able to evolve in his own inner life. His poetry is, of course, the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling, as all genuine poetry must needs be; but it is not the expression of feeling that is immediate, but of one that is regained in composure. It is, in his own words, "emotion recollected in tranquillity."

Moreover, all his faculties worked together in perfect harmony. A beautiful passage from Prof. Dowden is in point and worth quoting: "All diverse energies blended in Wordsworth's nature into a harmonious whole. The senses were informed by the soul and became spiritual; passion was conjoined with reason and with conscience; knowledge was vivified by emotion; a calm passivity was united with a creative energy; peace and excitation were harmonised; and over all brooded the imagination. The state which results from such consentaneous action of diverse faculties is one not of pure passion, not of pure thought; it is one of impassioned contemplation."

The poetry of Wordsworth stands unique in respect of the fact that it is an expression, a direct, simple and unsophisticated expression, of an original conception of Nature. Nature was for Wordsworth not a lifeless, though beautiful, sum of things where poets and artists might go to make an inventory of her charms, but an organic whole, vitalised by an all-pervading Soul which is the same in Man and Nature.

"To her fair works did Nature link  
The human soul that through me ran."

Nature, thus conceived, becomes as susceptible to pain and pleasure as any the most sensitive creature among human beings.

“Through primrose tufts, in that sweet bower,  
The periwinkle trailed its wreaths ;  
And 'tis my faith that every flower  
Enjoys the air it breathes.”

“The budding twigs spread out their fan  
To catch the breezy air ;  
And I must think, do all I can,  
That there was pleasure there.”

Not only is Nature regarded as fully sentient but also as possessed of a moral life, and capable, therefore, of teaching the highest and the truest wisdom to man.

“Books ! 'tis a dull and endless strife ;  
Come, hear the woodland linnet,  
How sweet his music ! on my life,  
There's more of wisdom in it.

One impulse from a vernal wood  
May teach you more of man,  
Of moral evil and of good,  
Than all the sages can.”

Though an ardent admirer of Wordsworth, Morley is content to regard these verses as the outcome of the poet's fun, "a half-playful sally for the benefit of some too bookish friend." He forgets that Wordsworth was, of all English poets, the least given to fun. The idea expressed in these stanzas is not the offspring of any half-playful mood ; it is an embodiment of the very soul of Wordsworth, which he is never tired of repeating. The *Prelude* and the *Excursion* are very largely commentaries on this text.

Wordsworth is the supreme mystic of Nature in English poetry. He did not, like the pagans of old, divide it into independent anthropomorphic deities, a Proteus rising from the sea here and a Triton blowing his wreathed horn there : he recognised Nature as an organic whole, in which an almighty and eternal Being resided. It was not the beauty of Nature which brought him joy and peace, but the *life* in Nature. He himself had caught a vision of that life ; he knew it and felt it ; and it transformed the whole of existence for him :

"And I have felt  
A presence that disturbs me with the joy

Of elevated thoughts ; a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean, and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man :  
A motion and a spirit, that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
And rolls through all things."

Wordsworth's poems on nature are, in brief, to be regarded not simply as graceful descriptive pieces : they constitute a revealing agency, like Love or Prayer, that opens to the comprehending mind new vistas of insight into the heart of things. And it is assuredly the recognition of this revelation and awe about them which makes a critic like De Quincey speak of the homely poet of Rydal in the following high strain :

"The very image of Wordsworth, as I prefigured it to my own planet-struck eye, crushed my faculties as before Elijah or St. Paul."

Wordsworth, then, is admittedly "the sovereign poet of Nature ;" but he is even more the poet of Man. It is at his hands that



“A Maid whom there were none to praise  
And very few to love,”

receives the simplest, finest, and briefest elegy written in the English language. The Waggoner, the Leechgatherer, the Idiot Boy, the Solitary reaper, and the poor Highland girl, who would have excited nothing but scorn in the heart of any other poet except perhaps Gray and Burns, are by Wordsworth not only sympathised with, but also loved and championed, so that Keble in his Latin Oration rightly remarks that “he has shed a celestial light upon the affections, the occupations, the piety of the poor.” Prof. Stopford A. Brooke also writes to the same effect: “He is the foremost singer of those who threw around the lives of homely men and women the glory and sweetness of song.” Wordsworth had, in fact, a reverence for human beings as such. He writes himself :

“And thus my heart was early introduced  
To an unconscious love and reverence  
Of human nature; hence the human form  
To me became an index of delight,  
Of grace and honour, power and worthiness.”

This is why there runs through his poetry a deep strain of human interest which at times becomes so powerful that it threatens to throw into the shade even his impassioned love of nature.

We have hitherto been dealing with the merits of Wordsworth's poetry, and it need hardly be said that we have in so doing made reference only to some of his most important qualities as poet, considerations of space forbidding us to dwell upon those points which he has in common with many others of his craft. We have made, for instance, hardly any mention of his love of liberty, his hatred of base materialism, his profound spirit of humility, his natural piety of soul and purity of inspiration, his contempt for conventional custom and yet his stout wish to throw off "unchartered freedom" and live a bondman in the light of Love and Truth. These qualities, however, are too conspicuous to call for any specific emphasis at our hands. There remains now the rather unpleasant task of mentioning the drawbacks of Wordsworth. We shall hasten through this part of our work as rapidly as we may, though we cannot totally ignore it; for the criticism of a poet, that omits all reference to his failures, is as futile a thing as the biography

of a soldier, that passes in silence over his defeats.

A rapid survey of the poetry of Wordsworth will bring home to the reader's mind a sense of the amazing inequality of his work. There are vast regions of stiff and barren soil. He is at times awfully prosaic. What Myers says about the *Excursion* holds good in the case of his other long poems as well. He writes: "Its form is cumbrous in the extreme, and large tracts of it have little claim to the name of poetry." It is important here to realise that Wordsworth was essentially a lyric poet. When he sang out, therefore, his thought or emotion in a brief idyllic verse, he was at his best; but when, imitating the "invincible knights of old," he laboured at sustained and arduous tasks, he really went against his grain and proved a failure. Wordsworth is habitually fond of lingering upon his own thoughts and feelings. That is why most of his poetry is disfigured by an excess of subjectivity. The *Prelude* is one big rock of egotism, and so are his other long poems also. "Tendency to a lengthy insistence on his own feelings and ideas is the worst charge that can be brought against him," says Myers. His poetry is entirely lacking in

humour. Here and there you come across a wearisome iteration and sermonising commonplace. He is at times pompous, oppressive, and tedious. His conception of human nature is singularly narrow. He was "retired as a noontide dew" and did not possess "Shakespeare's boundless, cloudless human view." His sympathy is with the mild song of the stock-dove and not with the fiercer passions of the nightingale. The romance of the human heart lay completely hidden from his view. He was not a dramatic poet; and he did not explore the darkest recesses of the soul. His absolute penury in the matter of dramatic art and insight is amply evinced in his tragic play, "The Borderers." But enough of this unpleasant task of finding faults.

"Not ours to gauge the more or less,  
The will's defect, the blood's excess,  
The earthy humours that oppress  
The radiant mind;  
His greatness, not his littleness,  
Concerns mankind."

Whatever the drawbacks of Wordsworth, his greatness as a poet can never be questioned. "I firmly believe," says Matthew Arnold, "that the

poetical performance of Wordsworth is, after that of Shakespeare and Milton, of which all the world now recognises the worth, undoubtedly the most considerable in our language from the Elizabethan age to the present time." He is one of the greatest sonnet-writers in English poetry. He revived the sonnet from the disuse into which it had fallen after Milton turned to other modes of writing ; and by his modifications of rhyme and *turn* he permanently enlarged its scope. He used it far more freely and for more varied purposes than did any other poet in English literature. Besides innumerable single sonnets, of the first rank, he wrote some well-known sonnet-sequences, such, for example, as *Sonnets to Liberty*, *To the River Duddon*, *Personal Talk*, and *The Ecclesiastical Sonnets*. Indeed, he is credited to have written no less than seven hundred sonnets, many of which are not only among the glories of Wordsworth, they are among the glories of English poetry. He shares with Milton the power of investing his sonnets with the essential characteristic of dignity. He introduced also a new element into the sonnet, the element of meditative tenderness, of natural mysticism. The peculiar note of Milton's genius was vastness ; the sonnet did not afford him room

enough. But Wordsworth had little of Milton's gigantic loftiness, his spacious freedom of poetic energy ; and, therefore, to him, as he himself confesses,

“ 'Twas pastime to be bound  
Within the sonnet's scanty plot of ground.”

Between the mind of Wordsworth and the genius of the sonnet there was, indeed, an almost absolute harmony. The sonnet requires a reflective habit of thought, a transparent clarity of expression, a discipline, not an abnegation or abandonment, of emotion. It requires

“Such a tide as moving seems asleep,  
Too full for sound and foam,  
When that which drew from out the boundless deep  
Turns again home.”

And these were exactly the peculiar features of Wordsworth's genius. It is this singular and complete adjustment of worker and implement which makes Wordsworth “a greater master of the sonnet than Milton ; the greatest on the whole that England has known.”

The poetry of Wordsworth is to-day and will be for ever a fount of pure wisdom ; a synthesis of the religion of the philosopher with that of the churchman, and a help to the cause of virtue and truth. Byron's poetry is strife and force ; Keats's an embodiment of sensuous beauty ; Shelley's the radiant flush of the rose on peaks divine ; but the poetry of Wordsworth is a panacea, an ambrosial drink which heals all ailments of life. Keats is the poet of sensation ; Byron the poet of passion ; Shelley the poet of imagination ; but Wordsworth is the poet of brooding contemplation. Byron never loses his firm foothold upon the earth ; Shelley always soars aloft in the thin region of azure skies, and seldom comes near enough to our tangible world ; but Wordsworth is invariably, like his own skylark,

“True to the kindred points of heaven and  
home.”

Keats is the poet of Beauty ; Wordsworth is the poet of Duty, “Stern Daughter of the Voice of God.” Shelley is the poet of Liberty ; Wordsworth is the poet of Law, of divine Law that preserves the stars from wrong and keeps the most ancient heavens fresh and strong.

Coleridge was a dreamer and a wizard ; Wordsworth a moralist and a visionary who won a mystic insight into the heart of things. He had the unique faculty of idealising familiar things. He evokes a profound sense of the infinite out of common life. His emphasis is everywhere thrown upon those spiritual forces within us which give us power over ourselves and the ability to lift ourselves above the reach of circumstance and the flux of external things. He is the poet of Memory, mother of the Muses. He is the poet of Joy,

“Of joy in widest commonalty spread.”

He is the poet of Sympathy,

“The primal sympathy  
Which having been must ever be.”

He is the poet of Faith, “the faith that looks through death.” Over his poetry there hangs the splendour of a mountain sunset. It is instinct with harmony, deep and eternal like the undying baritone of the sea. It is permeated with a spirit of reflection, which is generous, large, tolerant, and pantheistic in tone. Wordsworth is one of the



greatest poets of childhood, not the childhood  
that is

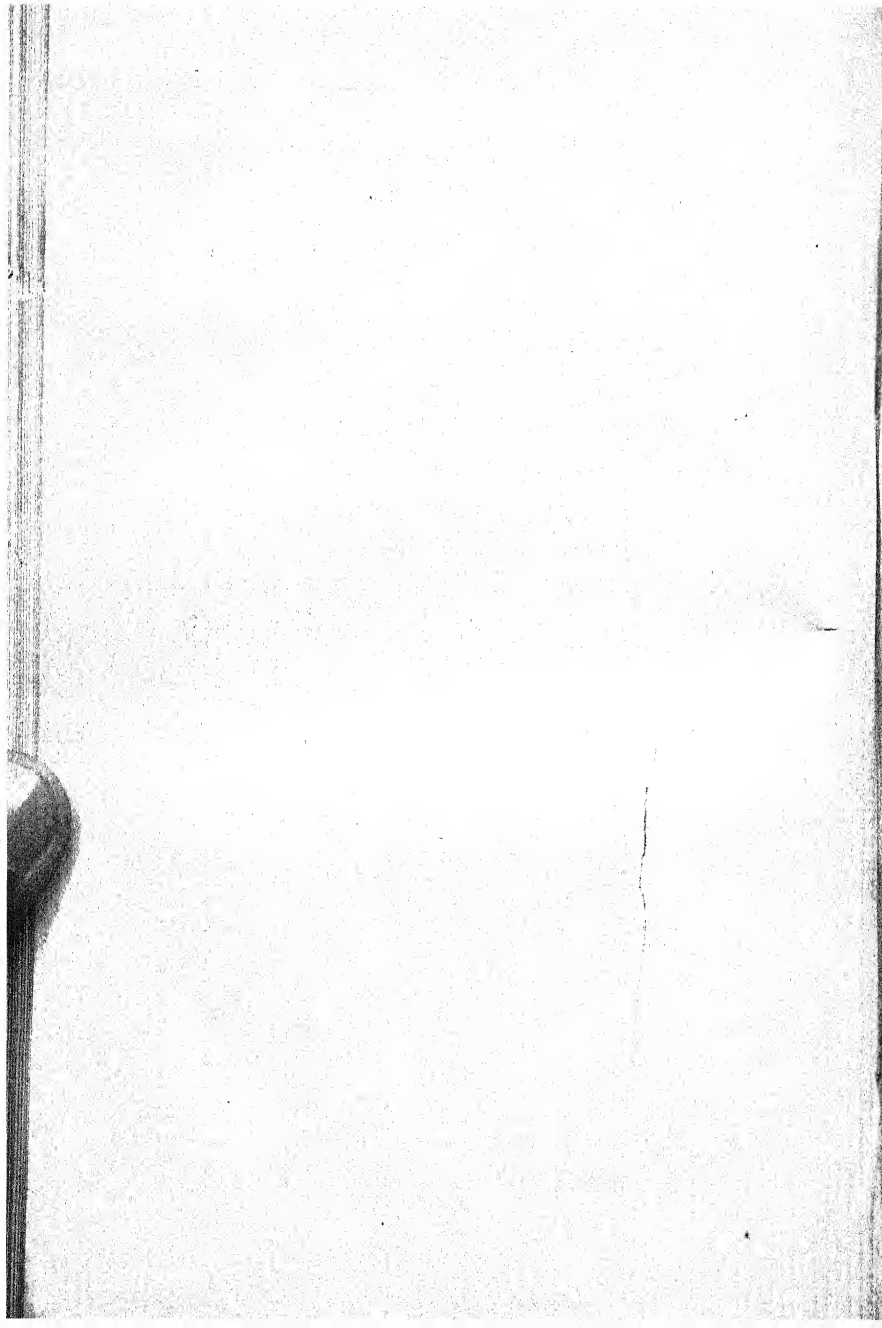
“Mewling and puking in the nurse’s arms,”

but one which,

“Trailing clouds of glory doth come  
From God who is our home.”

By virtue of his glorious and manifold achievement  
he occupies a unique position in the brotherhood  
of the world’s poets, of whom he himself writes :

“Blessings be with them, and eternal praise,  
Who gave us nobler loves, and nobler cares—  
The Poets, who on earth have made us heirs  
Of truth and pure delight by heavenly lays.”



## JANE AUSTEN.

"Life," says Holmes, "is a great bundle of little things." The things which go to compose the great bundle of life are so minute indeed that only a microscopic intelligence can discern them singly; while the bundle is so huge that only Omniscience can perceive the whole of it at once. Now the function of fiction is to get hold of as many of these little things of life as possible and so to present them as to correspond to the great whole. In other words, fiction must convey an impression, not only of variety and entirety, but also of realistic lifelikeness. It must not be understood that we mean to banish the bizarre, the sublime, and the ridiculous from the domain of fiction: what is meant is simply this that each of them must come in its proper place and form. There is, so to speak, the natural propriety of the Burlesque; the earthly touch of the Grand; and the realistic aspect of the Bizarre. Writers who strain after the romantic effect in and out of season often plunge into the bathos of absurdity. They may delight for the time being mere buffoons of literature, but the cultured taste is bound, soon or late, to find fault with them. This is why Mrs. Radcliffe is no longer appreciated; while the novels

of Miss Austen, few though they are, will last till eternity, for "they are of human nature all compact."

In her own day Jane Austen lived in comparative obscurity, while writers like Miss Ferrier and Edgeworth whom she has now completely surpassed, enjoyed a remarkable reputation. This early want of popularity is due, it must be borne in mind, not to any radical defect in her productions, but rather, curiously enough, to a point of excellence which her times were slow to acknowledge. Completeness was then not so much prized as it is now; for fiction was yet in her callow days, and the modern highly developed ideas about her true nature and function were almost entirely wanting. Every novel of Jane Austen is an idyllic specimen of artistic symmetry. The parts bear a certain fine proportion to the whole which in its turn is rounded off with the rare skill of a Sculptor or a Master mason. Sir Walter Scott's observation is here in point:—"There's a finishing-off in some of her scenes which is really quite above everything else."

The paramount claim of Austen to our respect and attention is founded upon that vital

spark of realism which is to be found in her novels. Every dialogue, nay, every word is put in the mouth of a proper person ; and we are made to feel throughout that we have come across, we know not where, men and women who bear a strong affinity to Darcy or Elizabeth, Catherine Moreland or Henry Tilney, and other well-known characters of her novels. There is here no product of pure fancy or romance. Everything is simple and ordinary, men, women, incident, and passion, but they are so beautified with a touch of artistic glow that they become, when coming from the hands of Jane Austen, a rare and uncommon gift. Tennyson who was exceedingly fond of her novels has well expressed his sense of this realistic quality in her writings :—

“The realism and lifelikeness of Miss Austen’s *dramatis personæ* come nearest to those of Shakespeare. But Shakespeare, however, is a sun, to which Jane Austen, though a bright and true little world, is but an asteroid.”

There are two methods of characterisation. Through the Direct Method the novelist describes from outside every salient trait of his characters, and dissects, explains, and comments upon their

motives, thoughts, and passions. In the Indirect Method the writer does not himself assume the role of the critic or commentator, but rather allows his characters to reveal themselves in their speech and action, throwing occasional cross-lights upon them through the mouth of other persons in the story. The evolution of fiction, it need scarcely be mentioned, favours the use of the Indirect Method, though an overdoing of it is always to be condemned. Generally speaking, therefore, it may be laid down at once that the novelist is accounted great or small in proportion to his use of the Dramatic or Indirect Method, other things being equal. Now if we examine closely the novels of Jane Austen, we shall find that she more often employs the Dramatic Method in her characterisation. Hence her superiority in this respect to George Eliot who seldom uses the Indirect Method, though, it may be conceded, she is forced to do so, dealing as she is "mainly with the inner life and with complexities of motive and passion."

Jane Austen's inborn faculty for humour, which is the salt of fiction, is universally acknowledged. But it is not of that bold type which sets the whole table in a roar of laughter; it is rather subtle, so subtle that it escapes our

notice at first sight. Her novels are, as Andrew Lang puts it, "bright, sparkling with wit and animation, in which the homely heroines charm, the dull hours fly, and the very bores are enchanting." Here is an example from *Pride and Prejudice*. Mrs. Bennet is eulogising in high strain the beauty of her eldest daughter Jane, and concludes—

"When she was only fifteen, there was a gentleman at my brother Gardiner's in town, so much in love with her, that my sister-in-law was sure he would make her an offer before we came away. But however he did not. Perhaps he thought her too young. However, he wrote some verses on her, and very pretty they were."

"And so ended his affection," said Elizabeth immediately. "There has been many a one, I fancy, overcome in the same way. I wonder who first discovered the efficacy of poetry in driving away love!"

"I have been used to consider poetry as the food of love", said Darcy.

"Of a fine, stout, healthy love it may.

Everything nourishes what is strong already. But if it be only a slight, thin sort of inclination, I am convinced that one good sonnet will starve it entirely away."

"Darcy only smiled," and you and I smile too.

By the way, can you ever, after reading this passage, forget the witty, vivacious, and charming character of Elizabeth? It is this gift of making her characters appear before our mind's eye, as if it were in flesh and blood, which has raised Jane Austen above the caprice or changes of popular taste and immortalised her for ever. Notice also that the novelist writes that "*Darcy only smiled.*" Why not *laughed*? Well, because, as Austen tells us later, "Darcy was not of a disposition in which happiness overflows in mirth." Every word or act in her novels, in short, suits the person to whom it is ascribed or the occasion on which it occurs. That is why a critic writes to the following effect:—

"For the publication of an abridged form of Richardson's works, there might be excuse; anyone who reads such an abridgement might be forgiven, for Richardson's masterpiece filled seven volumes!



But with Jane Austen there is nothing to abridge, every sentence tells, there is no prolixity, every word has its intrinsic value, and to retell her sparkling little stories in commonplace language is indeed to attempt the painting of the rose."

With one instance more from the same novel we shall take leave of this entertaining subject. Mr. Collins, 'one of the most famous characters in comedy, a burlesque of the highest order, worthy of Moliere or Dickens,' seeks in a private interview the hand of Elizabeth or Lizzie who, of course, refuses him at once. Mr. Collins waved her refusal aside as only a move in the game played by all "elegant females." Mrs. Bennet assures Mr. Collins that "Lizzie shall be brought to reason," and calls to Mr. Bennet in his study to scold Lizzie into compliance.

"Come here, child," cried her father as she appeared. "I have sent for you on an affair of importance. I understand that Mr. Collins has made you an offer of marriage. Is it true?" Elizabeth replied that it was. "Very well and this offer of marriage you have refused?"

"I have, Sir."

"Very well, We now come to the point. Your mother insists upon accepting it. Is it not so, Mrs. Bennet?"

"Yes, or I will never see her again."

"An unhappy alternative is before you, Elizabeth. From this day you must be a stranger to one of your parents. Your mother will never see you again if you do not marry Mr. Collins, and I will never see you again if you do."

Is this not "comedy of the highest order, with the touch of exaggeration or burlesque which is essential to comedy?" Is not Mr. Bennet a mysterious character? And is not Jane Austen exact in her characterisation to the last point when she writes in the very opening chapter that "Mr. Bennet was so odd a mixture of quick parts, sarcastic humour, reserve, and caprice, that the experience of three and twenty years had been insufficient to make his wife understand his character?"

The points of excellence which Jane Austen commands as a novelist are conspicuous, but the faults are no less so. Her plots, for instance,

though worked out with consummate art, are not highly original or ingenious. Accident without which fiction loses half its charm is completely debarred from her works. Her range of power and perception also is manifestly narrow. She commits herself to the fault of repetition not only of certain situations but of even characters. She never dared, like George Eliot, to handle complex cases; and if she had, it is certain she would have failed, for hers was not an imagination that could conceive and body forth phases of experience which lay beyond her personal observation. "She never penetrated," as George Eliot puts it, "into the deeper experiences, the powerful emotional and spiritual things of life." She does not seem also to have made any good use of nature. Her novels lack almost entirely the back-ground of natural scenery or weather. There is, as Charlotte Brontë complains rightly, "no open country, no fresh air, no blue hill, no bonny beck." Her style is remarkable not so much for any skill in composition or distinction in language as for the exquisite choice of words.

In spite of her faults, however, it has to be admitted that Miss Austen, 'with an exquisite touch which renders commonplace things and

characters interesting from truth of description and sentiment,' produced the best novels we have of everyday society. "Jane Austen was the first to draw exactly what she saw around her in a humdrum country life, and to discard all incident, all adventure, all grotesque types, for perfect simplicity. She little understood what she was doing, but herein lies her wonderful power, she was a pioneer." *Emma* and *Northanger Abbey*, were great favourites with Scott and he often read chapters of them to his evening circle. Tenneyson was awfully fond of *Persuasion* and *Mansfield Park*. In short, her half a dozen novels are the 'Fleurs-de-immortelle' in the garden of fiction, that have shed their healthy perfume far and wide over the modern world.

"Shakespeare has had neither equal nor second, but among the writers who have approached nearest to the manner of the great Master, we have no hesitation in placing Jane Austen, a woman of whom England is justly proud. She has given us a multitude of characters, all, in a certain sense, commonplace, all such as we meet every day, yet they are all as perfectly discriminated from each other as if they were the most eccentric of human beings." *Macaulay*.

## SHELLEY, THE MAN AND THE POET

To offer a satisfactory criticism on the poetry of Shelley is, we are afraid, no easy job. He is one of the most difficult of English poets for purposes of analytical criticism. Even Prof. Saintsbury, one of the acutest of critics, realises the difficulty and says, "On no poet is criticism so unsatisfactory as on Shelley, because in none is the poetry so pure, so independent of subject, so mere a harmony in the early Greek sense of the word. Analysis of it is nearly impossible." Where a critic of the eminence of Prof. Saintsbury feels diffident it will be the height of presumption on our part if we imagine that what we shall be able to say in the following pages will be received by the reader with feelings of unmingled and absolute satisfaction. Nevertheless, we must do our best and leave others to judge.

Percy Bysshe Shelley was born in 1792 at Horsham. He was the eldest son of a country squire, a man of conservative and old-fashioned habits and, as such, a strange progenitor for a poet so ethereal. Shelley was beautiful and tender-hearted as an angel. He was tremblingly alive

in every fibre of his being. He was, so to say, a wind-harp responsive to the breath of every breeze. The sight of pain occasioned by the heartlessness of man infuriated him beyond control, and the sight of misery, human or animal, appealed to his profoundest sense of pity. Thus, altogether, he looked and behaved from the very first like a being from another sphere. At Eton he struck a pen-knife through a bully's hand and gained the title of Mad Shelley. And mad, indeed, he may be called, 'if mad it is to be unlike the world.' In due course of time he went to Oxford, wrote a pamphlet on the Necessity of Atheism, and was expelled without argument, though, strangely enough, the University has, in recent years, set up his statue and claimed him among her cherished sons. Two years later a pretty school-girl, Harriet Westbrook, fell in desperate love with him, declaring that she could not live without him, and so they eloped together. But such a union could not possibly last for long. They separated and Shelley married again. His second wife was Mary Godwin, daughter of the celebrated political philosopher, William Godwin. They settled in Italy, where nearly all his principal poems were written and from which he was destined never to return.

During all this time he was busy in writing work. But his early poems showed no distinction nor even any promise. His first work of any note was *Queen Mab*, privately printed in 1813, when he was only eighteen. It is a crude and immature work on the whole, though beautiful in parts and quite remarkable as the production of a mere boy of eighteen. Its rhythm is founded on that of Southey's *Thalaba*, though his fertile imagination and exquisite sense of harmony preserves him from slavish imitation. It is a speculative poem, written in irregular, unrhymed metre, divided into nine sections of about two hundred lines each. Through the mouth of the fairy Queen Mab the poet inveighs against kings, priests, statesmen; he denounces human institutions such as marriage and commerce; condemns the christian religion, and declares his belief in the future regeneration of mankind when all things shall be recreated and the flame of consentaneous love shall inspire all life.

*Queen Mab* was followed by *Alastor*, published in 1816. The harsh notes and the crude philosophy of the former are no longer heard. Southey has yielded place to Coleridge and Wordsworth, to the romantic chasm of *Kubla Khan* and



the visionary boy of the *Excursion*. In *Queen Mab* the poet glances abroad and makes the whole universe the subject of his song; in *Alastor* he looks inward and broods over the thoughts and emotions of his own soul. It is the first and most pathetic portrait of Shelley's own self. It is an expression of the dreamy and solitary side of his nature. It is an allegorical poem, in which the idealist is depicted happy in the contemplation of lofty thoughts and in visions of radiant beauty. But presently he seeks in reality the counterpart of his dreams, meets with frustration, is plunged into despair and dies. The poem is not only a condemnation of self-centred idealism but also a lament for a world in which worms and beasts and sordid men live on while some surpassing spirit is borne away, leaving to the survivors "pale despair and cold tranquillity." Thus the lesson which Shelley wishes to bring home to the mind of his readers is that a self-centred idealist can never be happy, since he is constantly tormented by his own desire for the impossible and torn into pieces by the furies of his own passions. But infinitely more miserable than the idealist is, he says, the man who loves nothing on this earth, who cherishes no hopes beyond, who lives an unfruitful life, who is morally dead, whose heart



is dry as summer dust and burns to the socket, while the aspiring spirit of some idealist leaves the bourne of time and space on the wings of his own infinite enthusiasms.

His next work, *The Revolt of Islam*, published in 1818, is a poem of twelve cantos in Spenserian metre. It embodies in a fantastic tale the poet's eager rebellion against the cruelties and oppressions of the world. Its object is to kindle the love of political and religious liberty. The influence of Spenser's *Faery Queene* is obvious not only in the form but also in the substance of the poem. Cythna, the heroine, is like Britomart a woman warrior of heroic valour and impassioned purity, though her ideals are those of a more modern time, seeking, as she does, the intellectual liberation of her sex and the advancement of the republican cause. Laon, the hero, is not like Byron's heroes lost in selfish gloom. He is a poet-prophet who aims at perfection and falls a willing martyr to his love of mankind. There is in the poem no trace of Byron's chaotic despair. It strikes, on the contrary, the note of hope and prophecy and proclaims a social faith, namely, that mankind is to be saved by Love which is recognised by Shelley as the only law that should govern the

moral world. The *Revolt of Islam* is "a brilliant dream-woof of poetry, in which are wrought figures, now purely allegoric, like the eagle and the snake, meaning the evil and the noble cause, and now purely symbolic, like the hero and the heroine themselves, who wage the eternal war of love and truth against tyranny." The poem is permeated and suffused by Shelley's faith in the might of spiritual forces against which hate is impotent and pain and death lose their sting.

In 1818, while he was staying at Byron's villa at Este, Shelley began that vast poetic drama, *Prometheus Unbound*, which in point of sheer lyric power and splendour has no parallel in the English language. It is one of the three greatest classical dramas written in English, the other two being Milton's *Samson Agonistes* and Swinburne's *Atalanta in Calydon*. Prometheus, the champion of mankind, is chained to a rock and subjected to perpetual torture by Jupiter who is represented as the spirit of hate and evil. The hero, that is, Prometheus, is supported by his mother Earth and by the thought of Asia, his bride, who represents the Spirit of Nature. At the appointed hour Demogorgon, the Primal Power of the world, drives Jupiter from his throne, and Prometheus

is released by Hercules who typifies Strength. Jupiter's fall is a signal for the regeneration of humanity, so that all the evil nature of man slips off like a slough. *Prometheus Unbound* is, thus, a triumphant presentation of the conflict of the invincible individual will against the tyranny of constituted authority. It presents a typical Shelleyan situation, the situation of an ideal hero facing a tyrant; and it sets forth also a typical Shelleyan doctrine, the doctrine that Love is the central principle of things and the key to the ideal future of humanity, that Love here and now is the substance of things and that evil is but a phantasmal shadow. The lesson that Shelley is anxious to teach is that the humanitarian, the lover of mankind, must always be prepared to undergo constant torture at the hands of Brute Force; that he should be a man of courage, firmness, patience, and magnanimity, that he should be free from the taints of ambition, envy, and revenge, and that he must be full of the milk of human kindness and instinct with the spirit of love. He must learn to rely for inspiration upon his Mother Earth. His heart must beat in unison with the spirit of Nature, 'whose footsteps pave the world with light.' He must have absolute faith in the Primal Power of the world, that Power whose

faintest touch is enough to topple the gorgeous empires of tyranny down to their doom. He must have faith in the future when the reign of love shall be established, when thrones of oppression, altars of irreligion, and judgment-seats of injustice will be things of the dead past, and Man will emerge free, equal, just, gentle, and wise, exempt from debasing dread and sovereign over the empire of his self.

*Prometheus Unbound* was followed by another play, *The Cenci*, a drama of real life, which proves beyond doubt Shelley's genius for dramatic writing. By reason of the daring imaginativeness of its style, its choice of a dark and painful subject, its dignity, maturity, and dramatic intensity, it recalls to our mind the master-pieces of Elizabethan playwrights. With the probable exception of Otway's *Venice Preserved*, it is, indeed, the greatest English tragedy since the days of Shakespeare. The story of Beatrice Cenci fascinated Shelley, appealing irresistibly to two of the deepest-rooted traits of his character, his sympathy for heroism and for suffering womanhood. Without ever becoming abstract or shadowy, he lifts his gross material into the highest region of tragic art. There is no diffuseness, no inappropriate imagery,

no vagueness, and no otiose generality. Everything is purely dramatic throughout; and the character of Beatrice is convincingly drawn. In fact, 'every character has a voice that echoes truth in its tones.' And, above all; the play is remarkable for its passionate heart-reaching eloquence. No wonder, therefore, that soon after its publication it received universal approbation and was recognised as the best tragedy of modern times.

*The Witch of Atlas*, composed in 1820, is written in *Ottava Rima*, a stanza consisting of eight decasyllabic lines, rhymed on three rhymes after the formula *a b a b a b c c*. It is purely a figment of the poet's own imagination and is conceived throughout in a playful, abstract, and dreamy spirit. It is an enchanted fairy-tale. The lovely witch, dwelling beside a fountain in a mountain cave, is a kind of child of Ariel and wild and wonderful are her adventures. The stanzas in which she is described are unrivalled for their delicacy:

"A lovely lady garmented in light  
From her own beauty—deep her eyes, as are  
Two openings of unfathomable night  
Seen through a temple's cloven roof—her hair

"Dark—the dim brain whirls dizzy with delight,  
Picturing her form ; her soft smiles shone afar,  
And her low voice was heard like love, and drew  
All living things towards this wonder new."

The poem is full of wild fancy, brilliant imagery, and fantastic ideas, and is, as such, peculiarly characteristic of Shelley's tastes.

In the year 1821 came the great romance of Shelley's life, his love for Emilia Viviani, who had been confined by her own father in a dismal convent because of her refusal to marry a suitor of his choice. The poet saw her in the convent, pitied her sad plight, and tried in vain to secure her freedom. His sympathy for this unfortunate girl soon took the shape of a love which was at once Platonic and passionate—a love which is enshrined in *Epipsychidion* in syllables of immortal fire. The title of the poem means a 'soul upon a soul,' that is, 'a soul which is complementary to another soul.' Emilia Viviani is addressed as the incarnation of ideal beauty, the Immortal Loveliness made visible in mortal flesh. The poem is an exposition and defence of free love ; and the basic idea is plainly expressed in the lines—

"True love in this differs from gold and clay,  
That to divide is not to take away,  
Love is like understanding, that grows bright,  
Gazing on many truths.....

.....Narrow

The heart that loves, the brain that contemplates,  
The life that wears, the spirit that creates,  
One object and one form, and builds thereby  
A sepulchre for its eternity !"

On the whole, however, *Epipsychidion* is the most unintelligible of all his poems and is addressed to the esoteric few. It is important to mention, however, that Shelley was soon disillusioned in his love for Viviani, discovering that she was, to use his own words, 'a cloud instead of a Juno.' Nevertheless, the poem is a brilliant master-piece of poetic art. The description of the visionary isle, for instance, is the most beautiful that has been written in the rhymed heroic metre in the nineteenth century. Besides, it is, as Prof. Herford aptly remarks, "the culminating expression in modern literature of the spiritual passion for ideal womanhood."

The news of Keats's death at Rome in 1821, and the erroneous belief that it had been hastened



by savage criticism, stirred Shelley to the composition of *Adonais*, an elegy written in Spenserian stanzas. It is modelled upon the most pathetic products of Greek idyllic poetry, namely, the laments of Bion for Adonis and of Moschus for Bion. The skill with which classical material is transmuted into modern thought is little short of magic, though the poet soars aloft on mighty wing only when he is free from the influence of his models. *Adonais* is one of the three greatest pastoral elegies in the English language, the other two being Milton's *Lycidas* and Arnold's *Thyrsis*. In point of its passionate eloquence and its larger philosophic reach it is, indeed, even superior to Milton's youthful lament for Edward King; while it surpasses Arnold's monody on the death of his friend and brother-poet, Sir Arthur Hugh Clough, in almost every respect except brevity. It is written in a calm and solemn style except when the poet is castigating the inhuman critics of Keats; for then his pen is dipped in consuming fire with the result that the poem is in parts a superb piece of invective. Moreover, it is, to quote the author himself, "a highly wrought piece of art," almost flawless in its composition. But what *Adonais* is most remarkable for is its strain of mysticism, that supreme moment of ecstasy in



which the limits of normal personality are passed, in which all boundaries, whether of the world around us or of our own erection, are broken, in which "the massy earth and sphered skies are riven," and the individual soul becomes one with the cosmic Over-Soul, and the flight of the Alone to the Alone is consummated in their union. Shelley himself thought this elegy the best poem he had written. "I should be surprised," he said, "if *that* poem were born to an eternity of oblivion." The concluding stanzas of this immortal elegy are the most sublime expression of the poet's philosophy of life and death. In sustained loftiness of thought, in richness of imaginative phrase, and in polish of style, *Adonais* is the culminating point of Shelley's poetry and has an honoured place among those select poems which mark the highest achievement of English verse.

Another work which was written in 1821 and published in 1822 is *Hellas*, a lyrical drama, inspired by the Greek proclamation of independence, which was followed by the war of liberation from the Turkish yoke. The principal character is Sultan Mahmud. He learns from successive messengers of the revolt in various parts of his dominions ; and the old Jew Ahasuerus calls up to

him a vision of the fall of Stamboul. Like *Prometheus Unbound*, it celebrates the down-fall of tyranny and the advent of a golden age of liberty. It was written in a mood of enthusiasm. Shelley had already celebrated in a couple of odes the dawn of liberty in Spain and Naples, he felt himself naturally impelled now to immortalise in song the uprise of the descendants of that people for whom he always entertained feelings of the deepest admiration. In the preface to *Hellas* he expresses his admiration in clear unmistakable terms, saying, "We are all Greeks. Our laws, our literature, our religion, our arts have their root in Greece. But for Greece.....we might still have been savages and idolaters." In respect of form this play of Shelley is constructed on the model of Aeschylus's *Persae*. It was among the last and the most beautiful of his compositions. It is distinguished by passages of great lyrical beauty, rising at times to the highest raptures of song. The choruses, in particular, are singularly imaginative and melodious in their versification. The last chorus is a triumphant expression of Shelley's ardent faith in human perfectibility ; while the chorus beginning with "Worlds on worlds are rolling ever" marks the highest point of the poet's resources in rhythmical invention.

*The Triumph of Life* is the last great poem of Shelley. It was published after his death. Even though a fragment it is one of the loftiest of his master-pieces. It is an imaginative allegory. The poet sees a vision of the human multitude, and in the midst of it the Triumph passes, the chariot of Life, the Conqueror, trampling on youth and dragging others in chains. Rousseau interprets the vision and tells him that those chained to the chariot are 'the wise, the great, the unforgotten,' vanquished by the mystery of Life. The vision then passes to the allegory of a single life, which also after a youth of desires and aspirations succumbs to the same mystery. And the poem ends abruptly with the words—"Then what is life? I cried."—a question of profound import but one whose answer, alas, we could not hear from Shelley's lips, silenced with pathetic prematurity by the icy hand of death.

The central theme of the poem is obvious: Life triumphs over those that live; the victors of the world are vanquished; the great thinkers are baffled or "teased out of thought;" and those who, like Alexander, seek to win the world lose all. In short, "all things are transfigured except Love." Love alone resists all transformation, defies the

effacing power of time, and is immortal. *The Triumph of Life* is written in that most difficult of metres, *terza rima*, of Italian origin and alien to the genius of English poetry, and even in Italian used with perfect mastery by none but Dante. Shelley is the only English poet who has successfully handled this exotic measure. The poem is remarkable for its splendour of music, 'its solemn speed majestic,' and its succession of visionary images. It is, in the words of Symonds, "one of the grandest torsos of modern poetry, affecting the imagination so powerfully that we would fain abandon criticism and acknowledge only the daemonic fascinations of this solemn mystery."

Early in July, 1822, Shelley set sail in a small boat from Leghorn. In a sudden squall the vessel sank and the poet met his death by drowning. A few days later his body was washed ashore and cremated. But the heart would not be burnt and was conveyed to Rome where it was buried near the resting-place of Keats. The stone bears the epitaph *Cor Cordium*, the heart of hearts, and is followed by the words of Ariel's song :—

"Nothing of him that doth fade  
But doth suffer a sea-change  
Into something rich and strange."

No English poet deserves the appellation of *Cor Cordium* or heart of hearts better than Shelley ; for none understands and expresses the inmost heart of things better than he. In fact, Shelley himself says in one of his poems—

“In mine own heart I saw as in a glass  
The hearts of others.”

And he may justly be called the Ariel of English poets by virtue of his ethereal delicacy, his preternatural swiftness, his ardent sympathy with what is right and good, his abhorrence of all that is base and foul, his dread of winter and love of summer, his fondness for mischievous sport, and his bodiless rapture among the stars.

In order to understand and appreciate the poetry of Shelley we must have a thorough insight into his character. We shall, therefore, indicate briefly the prominent traits of his personality. Revolt against rule and convention was in the very blood of Shelley ; it was hereditary in his family. His grandfather, for instance, was a strange and restless man who had eloped with two of his three wives ; and two of whose daughters had eloped in their turn. This

hereditary revolt against stereotyped conventions was in Shelley further confirmed by his alert receptivity and keen sensitiveness. He had a natural antipathy against everything foul or stupid and never entered into a compromise with it. He was a man of passionate indignation and yet capable of tranquil resistance. He was a rare blend of opposites and was at once mild and militant, tender and terrible, tame and tempestuous. He was, in the words of Brandes, "excitable as a poet, brave as a hero, gentle as a woman, blushing and shy as a young girl, and light and swift as Shakespeare's Ariel." Mrs. Williams said, "He comes and goes like a spirit, no one knows when or where." His eyes had a feminine and an almost seraphic look, and his face was suggestive of promptitude and decision. He looked preternaturally intelligent and was also one of the most beautiful men of his time, so much so, indeed, that Mulready, a distinguished painter of his day, said that it was simply impossible to paint his portrait—he was "too beautiful." He was, besides, the most lovable of men, binding everybody who knew him with hoops of steel; so that persons so essentially different from one another as Hogg, Byron, Peacock, Leigh Hunt, Trelawny, Medwin, and Williams were convinced that he was the

gentlest, the purest, the bravest, and the most spiritual being they had ever met. Hogg says that for 'the wildness of speculation, the zealous earnestness for the augmentation of knowledge, and the glowing philanthropy and boundless benevolence that marked him, Shelley was without a parallel.' "In no individual perhaps was the moral sense more completely developed than in Shelley ; in no being was the perception of right and wrong more acute." Superstition, injustice, every species of despotism, and all coarse, immodest, and unclean thoughts or things were the objects of his abhorrence.

There are many critics of Shelley who imagine that he was a mere dreamer, a mere theorist and a visionary. This is an absolutely erroneous notion. He was a man of ardent faith, such faith as was never content with the mere holding or even with the mere teaching of opinions. He was not like a pastor who recked not his own reed ; for, whatever his opinions, he always attempted to put them into practice. He was not satisfied, for instance, to be a mere theoretical atheist, but wrote a pamphlet on the necessity of atheism and sent a copy to every one of the university authorities at Oxford, even though he was expelled for so



doing. In the same way he evinced his sympathy with Irish Independence by carrying on a vigorous propaganda in the streets of Dublin. And at Marlowe and Tremadoc he showed his compassion for the suffering poor by arranging practical help for them. From all these facts it is obvious that Shelley was no mere theorist but an eminently practical man, since whatever he believed he immediately tried to realise.

Another misconception which prevails among the critics of Shelley is that he was utterly destitute of humour. It should be borne in mind that Shelley indulged at times in the wildest flights of mirth and mischief. At Eton, for example, he sent his tutor hurtling across the room by means of a galvanic battery. Again, one day when he and his wife were walking together in Dublin he could not resist the temptation of amusing himself by popping a copy of his *Address to the Irish People* into the hood of a lady's cloak, an act which made his wife, as she said, 'almost die of laughing.' The poet's *Letter to Maria Gisborne*, which is in verse, is full of gaiety. The Gisborne family, be it remembered, had a faculty for cheering the poet. The nose of Mr. Gisborne had a peculiar fascination for him ;



and in one of his prose letters he gives quite a funny description. He writes :

“I, you know, have a little turn-up nose ; Hogg has a large hook one ; but add them both together, square them, cube them, and you will have but a faint idea of the nose to which I refer.”

It is, therefore, wrong to imagine that Shelley was devoid of the gift of humour, though, we admit, his humour was fitful and often edged with satire. He was full of high spirits and also a kind of infectious fun.

Another popular fallacy which was fostered by Matthew Arnold is the conception of Shelley as ‘a beautiful but ineffectual angel, beating in the void his luminous wings in vain.’ Arnold, it seems to us, has allowed himself to be taken in by the fascination of his own beautiful phrase. He forgets that Shelley was one of the greatest poets of liberty, of external liberty, social, political, and economic, and also of inward liberty which aims at the emancipation of a man’s own deepest self. Arnold forgets that Shelley was with Victor Hugo and Walt Whitman one of the three greatest poets of democracy, and anticipated many of the most

important movements of the modern world. He was, for example, the singer of a socialist ideal before socialism was hardly born. He chanted the national independence of every people that he knew. He was a leader in the Feminist movement, demanding the emancipation of women in the interests of men as much as in their own. "Can man," he asks, "be free, if woman remains a slave?" He was not a foaming advocate of violent measures or a reckless destroyer of good and humane institutions. He was a sensible and sagacious reformer, believing that the cause of reform would be best served by education. In his incomplete pamphlet on "Philosophical View of Reform" he advocated absolute freedom in the expression of opinion, equal laws and justice for all, abolition of tithes, repayment of the National Debt, and other similar reforms which are neither visionary nor impractical. The liberation of the masses from their economic and spiritual bondage was the central creed of Shelley's politics; and he gives it a vivid expression in his *Masque of Anarchy*. He welcomed Science with rapturous delight; and though the doctrine of Evolution had no place in his philosophy of life his sense of a kinship in all life was as keen as Goethe's. In view of all these considerations Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch rightly

observes that "*ineffectual* is the falsest word that has been—the falsest word that can be—applied to Shelley. Our true poets are prophets and of all our prophets amid our present discontents Shelley still exerts over the mass of Englishmen an incomparable power which has to be consented with." "I want you to see," he continues, "the spirit of Shelley naked as I see it—naked as a sword and therefore effectual as a sword." "Gifted with a touch as unerring as Ithuriel's spear," says Symonds, "he unmasked every species of sham and hypocrisy and laid bare the very substance of the soul beneath the crust of dogma and the froth of traditional beliefs." And he revealed that Spiritual Glory, that Eternal Beauty which interpenetrates the granite mass of things, which underlies them, shapes them, sustains them from beneath and kindles them from above. It is this Power, this Cosmic Force that he invokes in his *Ode to the West Wind*, so that the wild west wind is a symbol of that invisible and infinite Spiritual Power which moves through the universe and also in the poet's own soul. In *Adonais* also he writes :

"The One' Spirit's plastic stress  
Sweeps through the dull dense world ; com-  
pelling there

All new successions to the forms they wear ;  
Torturing the unwilling dross, that checks its  
flight,  
To its own likeness, as each mass may bear ;  
And bursting in its beauty and its might  
From trees and beasts and men into the  
heaven's light."

And Alfred Noyes rightly remarks "that to be the herald of that Spirit is not to be an ineffectual angel, even though the message be too mighty for the bearer."

Another charge that used to be at one time levelled against Shelley is that of atheism. The facts which lend a sort of specious support to this charge are that he wrote a pamphlet on the necessity of atheism while he was still a student at Oxford ; that he hated priests who, as he says, "babble of a God of peace, even whilst their hands are red with guiltless blood," who with their sacrifice of helpless innocent creatures make a slaughter-house of this fair earth ; and that he detested religion—false religion, which he calls a "prolific fiend who peoples earth with demons, Hell with men, and Heaven with slaves." When Shelley said he was an atheist he merely expressed

his hatred of that dismal religion which in his opinion had been the most powerful instrument in the hands of kings and priests for the enslavement of men and women. He used the word Atheism, as he told his friend Trelawny, "to express his abhorrence of superstition ; he took it up as a knight took up a gauntlet in defiance of injustice." Shelley was, be it remembered, very fond of the Bible, particularly of the Book of Job ; and the influence of the Old Testament on his style is obvious in several of his poems. He had a profound reverence for the personality of Jesus. And he had exceeding faith in the essential spirit of Christianity. He had the roots of all religion in his mind. He had reverence. He had genuine humility. He had sincere love of his fellow-men. He had noble ethics. And above all, he had an intense perception of that Infinite Love who consumes the clouds of life and dissolves all human perplexities. To call him an atheist is to be guilty of sacrilege ; for he was in reality one of the most religious-minded of English poets ; and there are numerous passages in his poetry which prove beyond doubt that he had the most vital faith in God that had ever been held by any of the masters of English song with the single exception perhaps of Milton. We quote below a few such passages.

Read them and the myth of Shelley's atheism is exploded for ever.

"Talk no more  
Of me and thee, the future and the past ;  
But look on that which cannot change, —the one,  
The Unborn and the Undying."

"The One remains, the many change and pass,  
Heaven's light for ever shines, earth's shadows fly ;  
Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,  
Stains the white radiance of Eternity."

"Dust to the dust : but the pure spirit shall flow  
Back to the burning fountain whence it came,  
A portion of the Eternal, which must glow  
Through time and change unquenchably the  
same."

It is to that Eternal Power, the One, the Unborn  
and the Undying that Shelley pours out his  
prophetic music :

"That Light whose smile kindles the universe :  
That Beauty in which all things work and  
move,  
That Benediction which the eclipsing curse

Of birth can quench not, that sustaining Love  
Which, through the web of being blindly  
wove

By man and beast and earth and air and sea,  
Burns bright or dim, as each are mirrors of  
The fire for which all thirst, now beams  
on me,  
Consuming the last clouds of cold mortality."

The limitations of Shelley's personality are obvious. He had no faculty for compromise. He looked with contempt on the ossified experience of past ages. The principle of evolution had no place in his scheme of life. He was a restless idealist, and, as Sir William Watson says—

"Impatient of the world's fixed way,  
He never could suffer God's delay,  
But all the future in a day  
Would build divine  
And the whole past in ruins lay,  
An emptied shrine."

He was intolerant of detail and flew at the grand and the spacious and did not care enough for the common things of life. And though he was an ardent lover of men, he was deficient in sympathy

with the actual conditions under which they think and feel. But, whatever his defects, no impartial critic can ever dispute the fact that he was one of the purest spirits that ever lived. He was a zealous philanthropist with a passion for reforming the world. Keats counselled him in vain "to curb his magnanimity, be more of an artist, and load every rift of his subject with ore." He was absolutely guileless and free from hate. In one of his poems he writes :

"Honey from silkworms who can gather,  
Or silk from the yellow bee ?  
The grass may grow in winter weather,  
As soon as hate in me."

He believed in the all-conquering power of love and mercy ; and his one commandment was, "Be thou kind." He led a simple life almost bordering upon asceticism. Vegetarianism was one of the articles of his creed, and this in a country where almost everybody is a carnivorous animal, and where his vegetarianism was an object of open ridicule. He cried out most bitterly against all those evil passions which spring from hardness of heart, such as sensuality, cruelty, envy, revenge, and avarice ; and injuring a fellow-creature bodily,



intellectually, or spiritually was the greatest sin in his eyes. He says—

“No sister-flower would be forgiven  
If it disdained its brother.”

We shall now deal with the salient features of Shelley's poetry. But before we do so we should indicate in brief his limitations as a poet. His defects as a poet were the natural outcome of his individual temperament or of his peculiar method of composition. In one of his letters he writes: “When my brain gets heated with thought, it boils soon, and throws off words and images faster than I can skim them off.” His poetry suffers, in consequence, from the drawbacks of haste, incoherence, verbal carelessness, incompleteness, occasional lapses into sentimentality or shrillness and a want of narrative force. He had a weak hold on objective realities. In fact, the poet himself says: “you might as well go to a gin-shop for a leg of mutton as expect anything human or earthly from me.” He was almost entirely deficient in self-restraint; and his poetry is, in consequence, destitute of that tranquillity which is the attribute and accompaniment of power. In one of the poems addressed to Jane he himself writes:

“Though thou art ever fair and kind,  
And forests ever green,  
Less oft is peace in Shelley’s mind  
Than calm in water seen.”

He is at times vague and formless and hovers transcendently in the air. His characters are rather shadowy and bloodless without any peculiarly individual qualities. A large bulk of his poetry is immature, not properly mellowed by reflection. He is diffuse and argumentative in his narrative; and his continual rhapsodies tend to become tedious and baffling.

“Shelley’s noblest and most predominating characteristic,” says Browning, “is his simultaneous perception of Power and Love in the Absolute and of Beauty and Good in the Concrete. From his poet’s station between both he throws swifter, subtler, and more numerous films for the connection of each with each than have been thrown by any modern poet of whom I have knowledge, proving how, as he says,

“The spirit of the worm within the sod  
In love and worship blends itself with God.”

He contributed, writes Symonds, a new quality to English poetry, the quality of ideality, freedom, and spiritual audacity, or, to use the poet's own words—

“The desire of the moth for the star,  
Of the night for the morrow,  
The devotion to something afar  
From the sphere of our sorrow.”

He is, indeed, one of the most spiritual of English poets. Even in one of his earliest poems, *Queen Mab*, he writes that

“Throughout this varied and eternal world  
Soul is the only element.”

He was more burningly possessed by this belief than almost any other poet of England. But because he found his substance in the soul unsympathetic and superficial critics have too often declared that his poetry lacks substance.

Shelley is a poet of personal melancholy and impersonal optimism. In other words, so long as he is thinking of his own life he is a pessimist and gives expression to some of the most pathetic

and despondent sentiments in English poetry ; but the moment he begins to contemplate the ultimate destiny of mankind he is a different man, an optimist, and a prophet of faith and hope in a world which had lost both on account of the failure of the French Revolution to realise the ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity. So long as he utters his own sorrows he faints and fails, he is a weary child, a frail form, and a mere phantom among men. In his *Ode to the West Wind* he cries :

“Oh ! lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud !  
I fall upon the thorns of life ! I bleed !  
A heavy weight of hours has chained and bowed  
One too like thee : tameless, and swift,  
and proud.”

And in another well-known poem he writes :

“Alas ! I have nor hope nor health,  
Nor peace within nor calm around ;  
Nor that content, surpassing wealth,  
The sage in meditation found,  
And walked with inward glory crowned ;  
Nor fame nor power nor love nor leisure.  
Others I see whom these surround—

Smiling they live, and call life pleasure ;—  
To me that cup has been dealt in another  
measure.”

But these faltering accents become trumpet tones the instant he turns from a contemplation of his individual lot to that of humanity in general. Then the weary child becomes a prophet, the phantom becomes a giant, and the frail form acquires the energy of a Titan. The dead leaf is lifted by the wind and becomes a lyre in the hands of the Cosmic Force, quickening the sleeping world to a new birth with its tumult of mighty harmonies. The poet sounds the trumpet of a prophecy, proclaiming to the slumbering earth that, if winter comes, Spring cannot be very far behind, that

“The world’s great age begins anew,  
The golden years return,  
The earth doth like a snake renew  
He winter weeds outworn ;  
Heaven smiles, and faiths and empires gleam  
Like wrecks of a dissolving dream.”

Another characteristic of Shelley as a poet is his profound sense of mutability. Of course, poets, as a rule, like all imaginative men, cons-

tantly return to the thought of change, of how everything in the world, including the self-styled Lord of Creation, Man, is evanescent. But from Shelley it evokes a characteristic response, a response which is remarkable for its simple truth and daring imagination alike. He broods upon epicyclic mutations and the decaying of planets as easily as upon the evanescence of clouds and flowers. Here are two examples, the one illustrative of his simple truthfulness, and the other of his daring imagination :

“The flower that smiles to-day  
To-morrow dies ;  
All that we wish to stay  
Tempt and then flies.  
What is this world’s delight ?  
Lightning that mocks the night,  
Brief even as bright.”

“Worlds on worlds are rolling ever  
From creation to decay,  
Like the bubbles on a river,  
Sparkling, bursting, borne away.”

It should be borne in mind, however, that Shelley’s sense of the permanence of the One is as

keen as his sense of the evanescence of the Many, that his cognition of the immortality of the soul is as profound as his perception of the transitoriness of the body.

Another noteworthy feature of Shelley's poetry is its ethereal delicacy. "Where Shelley is most himself," says the Norwegian critic George Brandes, "he surpasses even Shakespeare in delicacy ; and there is no other poet with whom he can be compared ; no one surpasses him." Instances of the delicacy of his imagination are not far to seek. They abound in his poetry. A single example should suffice here, the opening stanza of his well-known song in *Prometheus Unbound* :

"Life of Life ! thy lips enkindle  
With their love the breath between them ;  
And thy smiles before thy dwindle  
Make the cold air fire ; then screen them  
In those looks, where whoso gazes  
Faints, entangled in their mazes."

By reason of his prophetic passion, his daring imagination, his simple truthfulness, his intense subjectivity, his exquisite delicacy, and his perfect melody Shelley is universally recognised as one

of the greatest lyrical poets of the world. His music is not the outcome of any elaborately calculated and devised technique like that of Tennyson : it is unpremeditated and instantaneous like that of his own skylark. He was not a laborious weaver of metrical patterns but a poet with a genius for extemporising pulsating rhythms. His imagery is not consciously wrought and skilfully finished like that of Arnold, but the spontaneous and natural projection of an imagination that is extremely vivid and kaleidoscopic, seeing things and ideas as symbols and pictures. In mood as well as in music Shelley is the very incarnation of lyric rapture. He is, in the words of Symonds, "the loftiest and the most spontaneous singer of our language," combining the gracious gnomic manner of Marlowe's *Hero and Leander* with the subtle and passionate argument of Donne and the gather and upward rush and explosion into golden stars of Crashaw. Every poem of his is a miracle of melody never approached except by passages in Swinburne. Language becomes on his lips

"A perpetual Orphic song  
Which rules with Daedal harmony a throng  
Of thoughts and forms, which else senseless  
and shapeless were."



And the range of his power is surprisingly extensive. He wrote the best lyrics, the best translations, and the best familiar poems of the nineteenth century. He surpassed Leigh Hunt in the familiar style, without falling into any of that writer's vulgarities, and anticipated the most talking verse of Browning without indulging in any of his tricks and grotesqueries. And when he, the lyrist, turned to drama in *The Cenci*, he excelled all the poets of his century on a ground which was not his.

Like Wordsworth, Shelley was a supreme poet of Nature. Wordsworth turned to Nature because of his innate and strong tendency towards isolation and seclusion; Shelley because he was denied by men that sympathy for which his soul craved and which he found in Nature. "I am one," he says, "whom men love not." No poet was ever more grossly misunderstood by his contemporaries than was Shelley. He was regarded as mad. He was regarded as an atheist. And he was all his life an object of abuse and defamation. He was disowned by his own father. His first matrimonial adventure was a miserable failure. He was deprived of his children by judgment of the Court. He was hounded out of England,



He sang new sorrow, sad Urania scanned  
The stranger's mien, and murmured, 'Who  
art thou ?'

He answered not, but with a sudden hand  
Made bare his branded and ensanguined brow,  
Which was like Cain's or Christ's—Oh ! that  
it should be so."

From the indifference, scorn, and hatred of men  
Shelley sought shelter in the loving lap of Nature.  
In one of his poems he writes :

"Away, away, from men and towns,  
To the wild wood and the downs—  
To the silent wilderness  
Where the soul need not repress  
Its music lest it should not find  
An echo in another's mind,  
While the touch of Nature's art  
Harmonizes heart to heart."

Wordsworth's attitude towards Nature is ethical and mystical ; Shelley's intellectual and imaginative. Wordsworth learnt from Nature the lesson of self-restraint ; Shelley that of self-abandon. Wordsworth was more attracted by the milder aspects of Nature ; Shelley by her wilder and more rugged

aspects, such as seas, mountains, and tempests. Wordsworth learnt from Nature the lesson of Law; Shelley the lesson of Liberty. Wordsworth learnt from Nature the wisdom of passivity; Shelley that of passionate sympathy. Wordsworth's love of Nature appears to us to be rather passionless in spite of all his professions to the contrary. Shelley loves her with all the ardour of his being. He has pursued her most secret steps like her shadow; and his pulse beats in mysterious sympathy with hers. He has gazed on Nature's naked loveliness and has become inebriated.

Shelley's descriptions of Nature are what may be called unearthly. His clouds dip to no horizon. His mountains are like airy castles, hanging in mid-air. His skylark is a scorner of the ground and is ever on the wing. Many critics have, therefore, censured his descriptions as nebulous; and nebulous they undoubtedly are, for Shelley intended them to be so. We must not forget, however, that if ever there lived a poet who could give a measure of substance to mere airy nothings it was Shelley. The west wind, for instance, in the well-known ode addressed to it, is invested with something of the concrete majesty of an invincible army. The cloud that

brings fresh showers for the thirsting flowers  
is as personal as Florence Nightingale. And  
winter arrives in *The Sensitive Plant* like some  
monstrous pagan god—

“Winter came : the wind was his whip :  
One choppy finger was on his lip :  
He had torn the cataracts from the hills  
And they clanked at his girdle like manacles.”

His poetry has, of course, a visionary quality, but it is never vague. The outline of his philosophy and its symbolism are always decisive and concrete. Even Macaulay, one of the least abstract of English writers, was impressed with the reality which Shelley managed to give to a system of belief which at first sight appears so vague and elusive. “Out of the most indefinite terms of a hard, cold, dark, metaphysical system Shelley made,” he writes, “a gorgeous Pantheon, full of beautiful, majestic, and life-like forms. The Spirit of Beauty, the Principle of Good, the Principle of Evil, when he treated them, ceased to be abstractions. There can be no stronger sign of a mind truly poetical than a disposition to make individuals out of generalities.”

Like Wordsworth, Shelley is one of the greatest

poets of Nature, but, unlike Wordsworth, he is also one of the supreme poets of Love. His conception of Love is something sublime and ethereal. It is not a human passion, but some impalpable force which can annihilate tyranny and ennoble human behaviour. It is the mainspring of all progress. It is the regenerating Spirit of the universe. And it cuts the Gordian knot of all the perplexities and embarrassments of man. The isolated love for an individual is swallowed up in this greater Love, which is omnipresent and yet evanescent, which is everywhere perceptible and yet elusive, and which peoples the universe with beautiful things and thoughts. He looks upon love as the solution of the mystery of life, as the link between God and Man. He is, therefore, justly regarded as one of the greatest love-mystics among English poets. In her note to *Rosalind and Hellen* Mrs. Shelley says that "love in Shelley's eyes was the essence of our being, and all woe and pain in the world arose from the war made against it by man's selfishness or insensibility or mistake". And the poet himself writes that "the great secret of morals is love, or a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own." The one lesson

which he is never tired of inculcating is that since love is the essence of God and Nature it should also be the essence of Man. We are dissimilar in order that we may discover our similarity. We are many in order that we may discover our oneness. And this, says Shelley, is impossible unless we learn the sacred lesson of love, the lesson which is preached with eloquent silence by every object of the universe. Nothing in the world is single. All things mingle into one another in obedience to the divine Law of Love.

“The fountains mingle with the river,  
And the rivers with the ocean,  
The winds of heaven mix for ever  
With a sweet emotion ;  
Nothing in the world is single ;  
All things by a law divine  
In one another’s being mingle.  
Why not I with thine ?

Shelley’s love is no carnal desire but that ardent worship which the heart offers to Heaven and which is so divine that even God dare not reject it. It is an eternal longing of the soul for “that Light whose smile kindles the universe.”

"I can give not what men call love ;  
But wilt thou accept not  
The worship the heart lifts above  
And the Heavens reject not :  
The desire of the moth for the star  
Of the night for the morrow ,  
The devotion to something afar  
From the sphere of our sorrow."

Shelley was not only one of the most inspired of English poets, but he was also a consummate artist. His fine frenzy or harmonious madness is universally acknowledged ; but his art has not received as yet the recognition which it deserves. There are people, in fact, who have a vague notion that he was not an artist at all. Keats advised him to be more of an artist. The American poet Poe says that "Shelley wreaked his thoughts upon expression, that he sang as a bird sings, impulsively, earnestly, with utter abandonment, to himself solely, and for the joy of his own song ; *but of art he either had little or disdained all.*" Wordsworth, on the contrary, declares that "Shelley is one of the best artists of us all : I mean in workmanship of style." Among critics of our own day Sir Edmund Gosse finds in his work "the most classical technical perfection." "No one among the moderns," he



writes, "has gone farther than he in the just attention to poetic form."

No elaborate argument, we feel, is needed to show that Shelley was a great artist as well as a great inspired genius. *Adonais* is a highly wrought piece of art. The poet's signal success in the domain of drama, in *The Cenci*, was the outcome of no mere instinct or lucky inspiration; it was the result of his profound insight into the principles of dramatic art. Moreover, he has handled even the most difficult metres such as blank verse, the Spenserian stanza, *ottava rima*, the *terza rima* with perfect mastery. Above all, his lyrics show an art of the highest kind. They sing with final felicity some of the purest moods of man. Shelley's art is like Shakespeare's, evermore present and yet eluding our grasp, an art that conceals its identity behind the pure light of genius, an art that is subtler and deeper than all the world's coarse thumb and finger can hope to plumb, an art which is

"Beyond the utmost reaches of our thought."

One important aspect of Shelley's art is the marvellous use he makes in his poetry of the effects

of light for symbolical and spiritual purposes. The light means to him what the sea means to poets like Byron and Swinburne—a symbol of the Eternal. And no wonder. He was, as we have already said, one of the most spiritual of English poets ; and he caught instinctively upon light, which is with its infinite variety of tints and shades the most spiritual element of nature. There is hardly a single poem of his in which we do not find some new effect of light translated into imperishable words. At times he dwells merely on its immediate beauty just as poets who are passionate lovers of the sea would dwell upon the curve and motion of a wave or the ebbing of a tide. But more frequently he uses it with a kind of figurative art. And still more frequently he seems to be concerned with its most immediate effects such as the reflection of a wet leaf or a glow-worm in a dell of dew. In fact, almost every critic of Shelley was vaguely conscious of the radiance of his poetry ; but nobody tried to find out the exact reason for this till Alfred Noyes, author of the *Torch-bearers* and one of the finest living poets of England, discovered it and correlated it with Shelley's peculiar vision of the world. And he has laid all lovers of the poet under obligation by clearing all loose talk about his

"luminous wings," his "crystalline poetry," and his "dazzling stanzas."

Shelley's preoccupation with the phenomenon of light is, as already said, obvious in almost every one of his poems. He speaks of "the gleam of the living grass," of "the light of laughing flowers," of "rainbow-skirted showers," of "stream-illuminated caves," of the dawn reddening the dew of the green fields, and of the long blue meteors cleansing the dull night. Flowers are for him blooms that "star the winds with points of coloured light." Fruits are "bright golden globes suspended in their own green heaven." And a mist is "an air-dissolved star." The Witch of Atlas is "a lovely lady garmented in light." Asia is the "light of life, shadow of beauty unbeheld." A poet is hidden in "the light of thought." And God is "that Light whose smile kindles the universe."

Swinburne regarded the sea as an image of the Eternal, a fact which lends a peculiar significance to his rendering of even the most momentary aspects of the sea. In exactly the same way but with more subtlety Shelley uses light. Because it is for him the image of "that Light whose smile

kindles the universe," his slightest picture of any of its momentary aspects comes home to us with a peculiar significance. Flowers were for him transparent lamps, little centres at which the Eternal Light became visible. All the minor radiances of the world were to him hints of a Major Radiance. And frequently his poetry is a perfect reconciliation in art of the One and the Many, rendered chiefly in terms of light. Shelley is, therefore, the supreme poet of light, not only of the light of common day or the many-coloured light of the glassy dome of life, but also of the white radiance of Eternity. "His art," as George Moore said, "is fashioned of mother-of-pearl, with star-light at the helm and moonbeams for sails." The light around which his poetry plays is no mere phantasmal phosphorescence, "but the offspring of heaven first-born, or the co-eternal beam of the Eternal. It is the light of that Beauty in which all things work and move. It is the light of Love that "folds over the world its healing wings."

We conclude this chapter on Shelley with a passage from Edmund's brief and excellent book entitled *Shelley and His Poetry* :

"Of none of our English poets can it be more

truly written that his life and his work are at one than of Percy Bysshe Shelley. If we write the story of the one, we find it to contain all that is essential of the other. More than any other great poet, Shelley lived his poetry; if it was wild, passionate, and defiant—so was he; if it is full of generous enthusiasms and exquisite dreams—so was he too. Theories, speculations, fancies, visions, fall headlong in melodious confusion through his poems: they formed equally the driving impulses of his practical everyday life. His “sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought,” just because his spirit was ever haunted by the tragedies and the tyrannies, the hideousness and the hate, which disfigured the beautiful world of his dreams. His poetry is one long cry for freedom, a torrent of pleading song. Brave, sincere, tender; acutely sensitive to all that is lovely in sight or in sound; a “blithe spirit” surmounting in ecstatic song the clouds of prejudice and evil—himself and his verse are these, and are at one.”



## TENNYSON

Alfred Tennyson was born on the 6th of August, 1809, at Somersby Rectory Lincolnshire. After education at Louth Grammar School, and at home, he went in 1828 to Trinity College, Cambridge, where he won the Chancellor's medal in 1829 for a poem on *Timbuctoo*. His 'poems, chiefly Lyrical,' appeared, in 1830. His first important work appeared in 1833, but it was by the two volumes of 1842 that his position was assured as, in Wordsworth's language, "decidedly the greatest of our living poets." Then came *The Princess* in 1847, and in 1850 *In Memoriam*, a philosophic elegy inspired by the death of his dear friend Arthur Henry Hallam; *Maud: A Monodrama*, in 1854; and *Enoch Arden and other Poems* in 1864. In 1850, having meanwhile won the foremost place among living English poets, he succeeded Wordsworth as Poet Laureate. In June of the same year he married Miss Emily Sellwood. In 1884 he was raised to the peerage as Lord Tennyson. The story of Arthur and the Round Table occupied his attention for many years, for, while the first four *Idylls of the King*

were published in 1859, the twelfth and last instalment of the series was not issued till 1885. For upwards of a decade he devoted his energies mainly to the drama, his principal productions in this new field being the three historical plays, *Queen Mary*, *Harold*, and *Becket*, published respectively in 1875, 1876, and 1884. His later writings included, along with many very different things, the remarkable philosophical poems, *The Ancient Sage*, *Vastness*, and *Akbar's Dream*, and the superb lyric, *Crossing the Bar* which is now always printed, in accordance with his directions, as the last poem in any complete edition of his works. He died at Aldworth on October 6, 1892, aged eighty-three years and two months; and on October 12 was buried in Westminster Abbey.

Tennyson is one of the most conscientious and accomplished poetic artists in English literature. Consequently, he is noteworthy for the even perfection of his style, his wonderful mastery of language both simple and ornate, and the exquisite and varied music of his verse. From the historical point of view he is specially interesting as the most thoroughly representative poet of the Victorian age, weaving all the multitudinous



threads of its thought into the fabric of his poetry. Its strongly marked eclecticism, its faith and gloom, its hope and despair, its spiritual unrest, its social problems, its political aspirations, its scientific achievements, its patriotic passions, its religious questionings, its philosophic perplexities, its wistful longings—all these are reflected, as in a limpid brook, in the poetry of Tennyson, so sensitive was the poet to the tendencies of his time. Politically and socially he stands out, on the whole, as the poetic exponent of the cautious spirit of Victorian liberalism. He was as far away from Shelley's revolutionary idealism as he was from Byron's iconoclasm. He was essentially the poet of law and order, holding tenaciously to the great heritage of English tradition ; and, while he firmly believed that in the divine scheme of things the will of God was slowly working itself out through manifold, constant, and perpetual change, he was quite as firmly opposed to everything that savoured of revolution. He is emphatically the poet of divine evolution ; and, though he was a reserved and secluded aristocrat, he was not averse to the spreading democratic sympathies of Victorian England. On the other hand, he was profoundly interested in common people and common things, so that his poetic work contains along with *The*

*Princess, Maud, Idylls of the King* such things as *The May Queen, Dora, and Enoch Arden*.

Tennyson was essentially a religious teacher. Not that he gave us any pontifical sermon or any formulated creed or any theological dogma, but that he imbued his work with the essential religious spirit, the spirit of faith, hope, love, and reverence, not unmixed with that 'honest doubt which is greater far than half your creeds'. And this is exactly what Tennyson ought to have done as a poet; for the province of art is the illimitable. "Art not only rejects," says Stopford Brooke, "it abhors all attempts to bind down into unchanging forms the thoughts and emotions which play like lightning round the infinite horizons towards which the imagination sails, piloted by love, and hope, and faith." And Tennyson, as has already been remarked, was one of the most accomplished poetic artists of all time, fit to be ranked with Virgil, or Dante, or Milton. It is in the fitness of things, therefore, that his poetry, instead of being the vehicle of rigid theological dogmas, is an expression, a lovely expression, of the essential religious spirit. And herein lies its peculiar value; for a dogma learned is, as Stevenson says, only

a new error, but a spirit communicated is a perpetual possession.

Tennyson's religion was, in his own words, a "clinging to faith beyond the forms of faith." And this clinging to faith was not the result of any blindness of judgment, nor of any passive, indolent, and superficial kind of optimism : it was the outcome of a process of painful inquiry and a hard spiritual struggle. "The poet valiantly fought his doubts and gathered strength ; he faced the spectres of the mind and laid them low : and thus he came at length to find a stronger faith his own." The most important articles of this faith were the ever-working immanence of God in man and in the universe as Will and Love, as King and Father ; the brotherhood of man and the necessary practice of love one to another : the evolution of the human race into perfect love and righteousness ; the continuance of each man's personal consciousness in a life to be ; the vitality of the present, and the consequent deep need for high poetic work. These faiths lie at the root of the religion which we find in the poetry of Tennyson. They are not given an intellectual definition, but are skilfully kept in the realm of faith alone, in the realm of emotion, of love and

beauty, of joy and hope and veneration, so that Tennyson is separated from all those poets who like Milton, Wordsworth, Byron, or Browning have a definite theology in their poetry. Tennyson is not a scientific agnostic, nor is he a poetical pantheist; he is a Christian theist, accentuating the truth of the divine immanence. He does not identify nature with God, but he sees so clearly in nature the working of the mystic life that he is convinced, were the physical veil withdrawn, the spiritual Power would be revealed.

As a poet of Nature Tennyson combines the observation of the scientist with the sensibility of the poet and artist. Wordsworth saw nature with the eye of the poet only, while Tennyson saw it with the eye of the scientist as well. He loved its beauty, but he felt also its indifference and cruelty: he saw 'Nature; red in tooth and claw with ravine.' No poet except perhaps Keats has ever been so sensitive to the varied loveliness of Nature, to the sensuous glory of things. "Nature's more august moods are better interpreted by Wordsworth; her ecstasies more subtly felt by Shelley; but the varying and complex spell of her multitudinous moods as a whole has found no finer artistic expression than is given us in the verse of

Tennyson. He can give us large effects ; and he can impress us also with microscopic effects, so much so, indeed, that with the single exception of Crabbe, no poet ever dealt with the *minutiae* of Nature so well as Tennyson. Tennyson's landscapes are never vague ; they are visualised, on the contrary, with an almost preternatural clarity. Another important feature of Tennyson's Nature poetry is its atmospheric subjectivity. Nature for him is often a "background for reflecting some human emotion, it carries no message or benison of its own, but harmonises with delicate adaptability to the mood of man".

As a poet of love Tennyson is remarkable for his tender reserve, his persuasive charm, his winning grace, and his attractive homeliness. He does not deal with the sublime heights, the mystical ecstasies, or the unfathomable depths of the passion of love ; nor does he deal with that hot tumult of love which surges through the poetry of Byron. He does not treat of love as an elemental force, just as Byron does ; nor does he treat of it as a transcendental passion, just as Browning frequently does ; nor, again, does he treat of it as a mystic mingling of sense and spirit, just as Rossetti does : he treats of it as a domestic sentiment, and for this

reason, Tennyson's love poetry carries with it a wider appeal than the love poetry of more impulsive poets. Nobody, however, should commit the mistake of imagining that Tennyson was temperamentally insensible to passion, for, despite the poet's precautions, it leaps out at times in warm and glowing colours. His exquisite little poem, *Fatima*, is frankly passionate; and in point of the sheer ecstasy of quivering passion *Maud* has never been surpassed. Nevertheless, it remains true that Tennyson avoids, as a rule, the sensuous, passionate, and romantic aspects of love, its thrills, its daring feats, and its elopements in the midst of hyena foemen. He is one of the purest of English love poets. "He has not written a line which may not be read in the presence of the most chaste and sensitive. When he sings of the sanctities of love we are in that Eden of long ago, where pure hearts and calm imaged the perfect face of love."

For supreme excellence in particular directions we still go to the earlier masters of English song. We go to Chaucer for fresh and original gift; to Spenser for uniform excellence and grasp of a huge subject; to Shakespeare for universality, for height and depth; and to Milton for grandeur

and lonely sublimity. We go to Wordsworth for sublime philosophy, ethical weight, and grip of nature behind the veil; to Coleridge for ethereal magic; to Byron for tempestuous passion; to Shelley for lyric intensity; and to Keats for sensuous richness. But no poet comes nearer to each of these in his own special field than Tennyson; and he has in addition his own field of supremacy. It consists, in the words of Edmund Gosse, "in the beauty of the atmosphere which Tennyson contrives to cast around his work, moulding it in the blue mystery of twilight, in the opaline haze of sunset: this atmosphere, suffused over his poetry with inestimable skill and with a tact very rarely at fault, produces an almost unfailing illusion or mirage of loveliness, so that, even where the thought and the image have little value in themselves, the fictive aura of beauty broods over the otherwise undistinguished verse."

Early in his career Tennyson was accused of want of intellectual depth. People said that he was not sufficiently thoughtful. That accusation was, however, refuted by the poet with such poems as *Vastness*, *The Ancient Sage*, and *Akbar's Dream*. But even at the present day there are

critics who persist in regarding him as rather shallow. Such critics disgrace their own wit ; they should be reminded of the words of such an acute scholar as Professor Saintsbury who says : "Tennyson had never, no matter what his detractors may say, come short in poetic thought." And his works must be studied in their entirety before we can appreciate the vast and orbic fulness of his accomplishment. By virtue of his versatility, his originality, his simple clear-sighted lucidity, his pictorial power, his magical phrase, his flawless workmanship, his uniform excellence, his vignettes of nature, his power of finding words for the most fugitive and elusive traits of our consciousness, and of interpreting the varying moods of the human spirit, his love of his country, his sense of readiness for far horizons, his heroic temper, his luminous subtlety and his broad undulating sweetness, his pure, high-hearted, and manly teaching—by virtue of this varied excellence Tennyson ranks with the great poetic masters of all time. "Orpheus with his lute can hardly have worked greater wonders in savage places than has Tennyson with the haunting refrains of his song-snatches, the yearful music of his love-plaints, the forlorn sadness of his elegies, or the mellow *lin-lan-lone* of his evening chimes."



## THE POETRY OF SWINBURNE

Great son of Neptune, who thy trident hurled  
    Amain at every wrong;  
And in the fever and fret of the world  
    Thy life was one sweet song.



## THE POETRY OF SWINBURNE

It is worth while at the outset to examine briefly the nature of poetry, so that we may determine the exact position of Swinburne as a poet. Poetry is not a mere cluster of words, strung aimlessly, as children string daisies "to be a moment's ornament." Nor is it a tinkle of tune or jingle of rhyme, with no shaping, informing impulse of thought and feeling divined in and through that outward body of sound. Poetry is the soul's infinite passion finding vent in spontaneous outbursts of measured and musical expression. Two things, therefore, are essential before any production can lay claim to the title of Poetry: the first is Thought in its widest conception; the second, Music, explicit and implied. So we get to Carlyle's famous definition of poetry as "Musical Thought." Thought which sings itself; ideas or emotions which dance, or march, or glide in rhythm; feeling which moves in tune and time, as naturally as the heart beats—these things are poetry.

The supreme triumph of Swinburne's poetry is its music. Take up any stanza at random

from the large body of his work and you will be convinced of that antiphonal harmony in which he stands unparalleled among the poets of the English language. Just read these lines, with due accent, from *Before Dawn*, which we quote not only because they are the monument of poetic melody, but also because they illustrate another quality of Swinburne's verse—namely, its sensuousness, which produced early in the poet's career a vociferous protest against him. Of this, however, we shall speak later.

Ah, one thing worth beginning,  
One thread in life worth spinning,  
"Ah sweet, one sin worth sinning  
    With all the whole soul's will ;  
To lull you till one stilled you,  
To kiss you till one killed you,  
To feed you till one filled you,  
    Sweet lips, if love could fill.

To hunt sweet Love and lose him  
Between white arms and bosom,  
Between the bud and the blossom,  
    Between your throat and chin ;  
To say of shame—what is it ?  
Of virtue—we can miss it,

Of sin—we can but kiss it,  
And it's no longer sin."

"Only Milton", says John Drinkwater, "is his equal in habitual mastery and range of consonantal and vowel music, and even he made no such exploration as Swinburne in applying that music to lyrical measures". Edmund Gosse also does justice to the poet's matchless melody: "Swinburne carried the prosody of the Romantic age to its extreme point of mellifluousness, and he introduced into it a quality of speed, of throbbing velocity, which no one, not even Shelley, had anticipated." The music of Swinburne's verse is, in brief, universally acknowledged, and it would, therefore, be rather idle upon our part if we multiply instances and authorities to prove a point against which no objection is forthcoming from any quarter.

It is important, however, to indicate the exact nature of Swinburne's music. It is of a twofold character: it is, paradoxical though it should sound, at once natural and artificial. Its artificiality is due to the poet's unparalleled mastery over poetical form and language; while his passionate, vehement, and ebullient temper is responsible for its naturalness and spontaneity which go to render the poetry

of Swinburne "more bounding and fleet-footed than even the most dancing measures of Shelley." The racing spontaneity on the one hand, and the air of art and trickery on the other, combine to give at times to Swinburne's poems an excessive facility which is the point of Trail's delightful parody in which an amazed world asks, "Master, how is it done?" and the poet answers:—

"Let this thing serve you to know :  
When the river of rhymes should flow,  
I turn on the tap and they come."

There are critics who, while they fully recognise the peerless passionate peal of Swinburne's music, imagine, nevertheless, that he did not possess sufficient profundity of thought. This, however, is a misconception which is almost an insult to the man who was "the most profound scholar of his day," who was "soaked in the wisdom of the ages;" and who was "responsive like an *Æolian* harp to every breath of the wind of past poetry." The truth is that, with the exception of Meredith and Browning and one or two more, Swinburne was perhaps the most intellectual of English poets. If, unfortunately, he had not his unexampled habitual mastery of poetical language,

he would undoubtedly have been as obscure and difficult as Meredith and Browning, and critics would then have celebrated him as a poet of deep thought, for, in the words of Arthur Conan Doyle, "they think that unless a thing is obscure it must be superficial, whereas it is often the shallow stream which is turbid, and the deep which is clear." But simply because his infinite power of expression enables him to convey every idea, however recondite, with the utmost imaginable lucidity, a few critics have fallen into the error of supposing that he was deficient in thought. For them, however, the judicious verdict of Edmund Gosse is a rebuff more than enough :

"We shall not merely fail to appreciate the position of Swinburne, but stumble blindly in our examination of his qualities, if we do not begin by perceiving that, to a degree unparalleled, he was cerebral in all his forces. He was an unbodied intelligence, 'hid in the light of thought,' showering a rain of melody from some altitude untouched by the privileges and drawbacks of mortality."

The sentence of Mr. Gosse should carry conviction, but if there be some non-believers still left, let them study the *Songs Before Sunrise*

Where is thought more profound, one is tempted to ask, than in these stanzas put into the mouth of the Earth-goddess ?—

“I am in thee to save thee,  
As my soul in thee saith ;  
Give thou as I give thee,  
Thy life-blood and breath,  
Green leaves of thy labour, white flowers of thy  
thought, and red fruits of thy death.....

For truth only is living,  
Truth only is whole,  
And the love of his giving—  
Man's polestar and pole ;  
Man, pulse of my centre, and fruit of my body,  
and seed of my soul.

One birth of my bosom ;  
One beam of mine eye ;  
One topmost blossom  
That scales the sky ;  
Man, equal and one with me, man that is made  
of me, man that is I.”

You will say that the thought in these lines is not at all deep, because you can understand it without the slightest mental effort upon your



part. To this the reply is that thought is not to be measured by the amount of pain requisite to comprehend it. If that were so, it would be easy for any poet to achieve reputation in the domain of intellectual depth, for he need simply write down words in promiscuous disorder, so that the critics may crack their brains over them to little purpose. Not so; Swinburne's musical clarity of expression should by no means lessen his virtual claim to profundity of thought. "Certainly", says Oliver Elton, "like Tennyson, Browning, Matthew Arnold, Patmore, and James Thomson, Swinburne revealed a new promised land for metaphysical verse, even if he only entered it once or twice." And he entered it once or twice only not from any want of ability to beat about the bars of Life's Mystery, and Eternity, but because for him Poetry was not the hand-maid of Philosophy: "not Truth, not Wisdom; but the rose upon Truth's lips, the light in Wisdom's eyes."

A good deal has been heard about the paganistic aspect of Swinburne's poetry. Passages like—

"But the gods of your fashion  
That take and that give ;

In their pity and passion  
That scourge and forgive,  
They are worms that are bred in the bark  
that falls off : they shall die and not live"—

may seem to lend support to such an accusation ; but it is clearly a mistake to see paganism in the poet's opposition to malign gods. For the gods that he denounced were obviously no more than the instruments of the destructive power that works through man. They were fashioned by man in his darker moods, and were not in themselves a prime source at all. These gods were not God. Them he would cast out, but he had no desire to dethrone the Power behind them. This is not paganism, but a quite modern mysticism. It differs from the former on one essential point : "it substitutes an active joy for a terrified, though not ignoble acceptance." It is, therefore, evidently an error to accuse Swinburne of paganism or profanity, for "profanity consists", as Bacon tells us, "not in denying the gods of the vulgar, but in applying to the gods the conceptions of the vulgar."

Some of the critics, fastening their attention upon the artificial air of Swinburne's poetry and its foundation upon literature rather than life,

have gone to the scandalous length of denying him even sincerity of purpose. They accuse him of a certain want of faith. But to question the good faith of his best poetry is a gratuitous insult to the man who wrote :

“The writer of *Songs Before Sunrise* from the first line to the last, wrote simply in submissive obedience to Sir Phillip Sidney’s precept—‘Look in thine heart and write.’ Mazzini was no more a Pope or a Dictator than I was a parasite or a papist. These poems and others which followed or preceded them in print were inspired by such faith as is born of devotion and reverence : not by such faith, if faith it may be called, as is synonymous with servility or compatible with prostration of an abject or wavering spirit and a submissive or dethroned intelligence.”

Swinburne’s poetry has also been arraigned for its prurient or sensuous tendencies. While there is no denying the fact that it contains references to certain unseemly actions of man’s animal nature, it seems all the same unjust to accuse the poet of immorality. Picture to yourself a beauteous maiden ; the roses of Provence in her cheeks, the grapes of Persia in her eyes, and the

darkest night of Georgia in her rippling curls ;— and then throw over her a sable veil studded with the stars. Such a maiden is Life ; and the religious authorities enjoin “Lift not the veil of Life.” But Swinburne, with his characteristic courage inherited from Admiral ancestors, dared disobey, not under the influence of Byron’s criminal yearnings, but inspired by an innocent, yet fervent, worship of Beauty, akin to that of John Keats. Like that of Shelley, the poetry of Swinburne was a centre of revolt. It was a revolt against the clergy, against despotic monarchy, and against debasing theology ; it was a revolt against the ethical, the political, and the theological order of the day. It stands for democracy and liberty.

“Life,

Eternal, passionate, aweless,

Insatiable, mutable, dear,

Makes all men’s laws for us lawless ;

We strive not ; how should we fear

Strife ?”

No criticism of Swinburne’s poetry is complete without mention of his passion for the sea and his love of children. There are numerous passages devoted to the ardent celebration of these two

objects of his delight. Speaking of the sea Swinburne himself says, "Its salt must have been in my blood, before I was born." *The Lake of Gaube* and *A Swimmer's Dream* relate real experiences and there is no mistaking the ring of a master-feeling :

"A purer passion, a lordlier leisure,  
A peace more happy than lives on land,  
Fulfil with pulse of diviner pleasure  
The dreaming head and the steering hand ;  
I lean my cheek to the cold grey pillow,  
The deep soft swell of the full broad billow,  
And close mine eyes for delight past measure,  
And wish the wheel of the world would stand."

Again, in *Ex-voto* :

"Yours was I born, and ye,  
The sea wind and the sea,  
Made all my soul in me  
A song for ever ;  
A harp to string and smite  
For love's sake of the bright  
Wind and the sea's delight,  
To fail them never."

His love for the sea is, indeed, a consuming passion,

and to every one of its changing moods he has given a haunting expression. It is, therefore, but just and proper that he is universally regarded as "the greatest singer of the sea." "Doubtless other poets", says James Douglas, "have sung the sea, but no other poet has sung it so spontaneously and so sincerely."

His love of children speaks out in unmistakable notes in the poem entitled *A child's Laughter* and many other pieces. In *Herse* also, speaking of a child some sweet months old, Swinburne writes admirably—

"All roses that the morning rears are nought ;  
All stars not worth a thought ;  
Set this one star against them, or suppose  
As rival this one rose."

It was the great desire of Swinburne to do something worth doing. In the Dedicatory Epistle prefixed to his collected poems he avows that his strong ambition is "to do something worthy of a young countryman of Marlowe, the teacher, and Webster, the pupil, of Shakespeare, in the line of work which those three great poets had left as a possibly unattainable example for ambitious

Englishmen." *The Queen Mother* and *Rosamond*, *Atalanta in Calydon* and *Erechtheus*, and the Marian Trilogy were the offspring of this ambition. They possess numerous magnificent passages of rare beauty. The choruses of the *Atalanta*, for example, are simply remarkable. But, on the whole, the dramas suffer from want of restraint. No audience can be found willing to listen to speeches a hundred lines long. *Bothwell*, the longest, covers some five hundred pages. But "to censure it", as James Douglas points out, "because of its length is uncritical. It is not a drama, but a dramatic chronicle, or, to use Mr. Swinburne's own phrase, a 'chronicle history'." And when *Bothwell* is studied from this standpoint, it will be found to be truly "a monument of that nineteenth-century discovery, the historic sense." Nor is it the worse for it as pure poetry: it abounds with rich passages of magnificent poetry, almost unequalled in their splendour in the whole range of poetic drama,—the dreams of *Bothwell* and *Darnley*, for instance, and the speech of John Knox, and the haunting scene in *Darnley's* chamber on the night of his murder. Its blank verse also is remarkable for its graceful ease and sweet spontaneity. As regards the characters in the dramas of Swinburne, they do not dwell in

the memory long. They are, as Andrew Lang puts it, 'sonorous rather than sympathetic, more heroic than human.'

It is worth while bearing in mind in connection with Swinburne's plays that they were never written for the stage. On the contrary, they were composed in deliberate contempt of the modern theatre, in which the drama is divorced from literature. Swinburne remains, in short, as Gosse truly observes, "a lyrical poet who crowded an imaginary stage with historic and literary rather than histrionic conceptions."

In the art of story-telling Swinburne proved rather a failure. The current of the narrative is not allowed to move forward by the waves of lyric impulse, which swell and sink wearily on a single or many, but not connected points. Mr. Lang's remark is in point. "Narrative", he says, "was not the poet's *forte*, he was too ebullient, and neither *Tristram* nor *Balin and Balan* was on a level with the early triumphs."

The most insistent motive in Swinburne's art is the exultant acceptance of the tragic significance of life. He accepted the tragic



opposition of evil to man's desire not as a pitiful event that can be endured only by the exercise of a severely disciplined faith, but as a positive benefaction satisfying certain direct and instinctive demands of his nature. The poet knows and finds joy in his knowledge that "the unending quarrel is the salt of existence here upon earth."

"For chill is known by heat and heat by chill,  
And the desire that hope makes love to still  
By the fear flying beside it or above,  
A falcon fledged to follow a fledgling dove,  
And by the fume and flame of hate and ill,  
The exuberant light and burning bloom of love."

Inspite of a few obvious drawbacks—his excessive use of alliteration, his verbal plethora, his lack of insight into proper histrionic conception, his want of self-restraint, and his destitution in the matter of story-telling or narrative power—Swinburne ranks supreme in respect of his dulcet symphonies, his orchestral harmonies, and his lyric raptures. The poetry of Swinburne may well be likened to a garden where delicious breezes blow, where fragrant roses bloom, where 'the bright brown nightingale amorous' sings her melancholy anthem in full-throated ease, where

bees and butterflies hum their soothing ditties, and where the green linnet, sitting upon his orchard seat, pours forth his song in gushes. Swinburne's verse is 'musical thought.' "He is a reed through which all things blow into music." His poetry is 'simple, sensuous and impassioned.' The pulse of the wind, the passion of the sea, is to be found in almost every line that he wrote. His mastery of poetical language, his command over poetical form, his lyrical impulse are simply unparalleled. "Over his poetry there is a kind of nebulous beauty, peculiar to him, defying analysis, and his chief, if not his only claim to distinction."

We shall conclude this article with a passage from John Drinkwater, which is significant from standpoints more than one :—

"The experience that he (Swinburne) recorded in his poetry was as powerful, as invigorating, and as mutable as the sea. It knew as many moods and was responsive to as many winds. It passes in our vision from turbulence to profound peace, from uncurbed anger to all imaginable calm and beauty of benefaction, but variable it is not lawless, and in change it is yet One."

## E. V. LUCAS AS AN ESSAYIST.

Edward Verrall Lucas was born at Eltham in 1868, and educated at London University. After working on Provincial and London newspapers he became assistant editor of *Punch*; and subsequently literary adviser and director to a publishing house. He has edited a definitive edition of the works and letters of Charles and Mary Lamb, and written the standard *Life of Charles Lamb*. His remaining works comprise travel-books, essays, books about painting, and a number of distinctive volumes which hover delightfully between essay and novel, and, which he calls 'entertainments.' He has also written a drama entitled *The Same Star*. He has compiled many anthologies, both in verse and prose, and he has written verses, notably for children. This many-sidedness of his genius is worth remarking. Lucas is not only an essayist, he is also a novelist; he is not only a poet, but also a dramatist; not only an editor, but also a biographer; not only an anthologist, but also an art-critic of supreme authority. It is, however, our firm conviction that he will live in literature by virtue of what he

has achieved in the domain of the Essay. We shall, therefore, consider him in the following few pages as an essayist only barring out of account, for the nonce, his work in other departments of literature, though it is, of course, voluminous enough to justify a separate treatment by itself. It is no mean achievement to have written, besides countless essays of first-rate excellence, as many as ten novels of no mean value, ten books, again, of travel about famous cities such as London, Rome, Paris, Venice, and Florence ; books of biography and art-criticism more than a dozen ; and many anthologies and editions of prose and verse for the old and the young alike. But it is as an essayist, as we have said, that he challenges attention. The essay is his characteristic medium of expression. About two-thirds of his total output has been in this kind, while it is first and foremost as an essayist that he has stood before the public.

Lucas is one of the greatest masters of the essay *proper*, of the light personal essay. Indeed, in the opinion of many, he is the *greatest* living essayist of England. And he is this by virtue of the fact that the peculiar qualities of the personal essay are also the peculiar qualities of his own

mind. A certain grace and lightness of touch, a quiet and confidential geniality of tone, a fundamental and all-embracing sympathy, a delightful play of easy and pervasive humour, a general philosophy of acceptance which lays no rude hands upon the world to 'mould it nearer to the heart's desire', an intimate naturalness of style which is at once a model of current cultivated ease of expression and a mirror of the best conversation—all these, recognised as the essential characteristics of the personal essay, are also the distinctive qualities displayed in the works of Lucas. His superiority to his contemporaries, some of them vastly greater than he in many respects, consists precisely in this: he is truer to the type, nearer to the genius, and more completely impregnated with the spirit of the essay proper than any of them. Max Beerbohm is too much of a caricaturist and a parodist; Chesterton is too much of a propagandist; he is audacious, argumentative, and paradoxical. Belloc is too much of a Rabelaisian; his extreme self-assurance, his boiling energy, and his scornful irony go against the grain of the personal essay. But Lucas is invariably at home in this delicate medium. He is, in one word, a born essayist who finds it completely easy to move within the confines of the personal essay.

Lamb is the acknowledged prince of essayists and Lucas carries on the tradition of Lamb. He wears his mantle and does so without presumptuousness. He is as wholly and un-ashamedly himself as Elia. He is, like Lamb, an incurable Londoner. He selects his own subjects and writes in his own way. His essays, like those of Lamb, are remarkable not only for their charm, their insight, their fancy, their profound commonsense and their delightful humour, but also for their delicate sentiment, their quiet wisdom, their humane 'bookishness', and their store of curious knowledge. But though the mantle of Lamb has fallen upon Lucas more intimately than upon any of his contemporaries, there are certain pronounced dissimilarities between the two. Lucas has not quite the same kindly and capricious humour. Though it is kindly in general, it is at times almost savage, as in "Those Thirty Minutes," a satirical dialogue aimed at people who agonise their friends 'by seeing them off on railway journeys'; while it is seldom boisterous and capricious. Lucas is, again, not half as fanciful and whimsical. He has little of Elia's gentleness. His robust urbanity and sophistication are poles apart from Lamb's innocence and quietness. Nor does there seem to be any vital resemblance between the styles of the

two. Lamb's has always a flavour of archaism about it, while that of Lucas has almost invariably the stamp of modernity impressed upon it.

It is worth while to indicate, in brief, some of the salient features of the literary genius of Lucas. The first and foremost among them is his unfailing charm. He is always enticing. Whatever he touches he adorns. He transmutes even the most trifling aspects of life into things of beauty. Everything in his hand undergoes a sea-change and is transformed into something rich and strange. Its origin, of course, lies in the fact that for Lucas the world is a mysterious place, full of interesting surprises. Life is for him not a humdrum, monotonous phenomenon ; it is teeming with riddles which 'haunt, startle, and waylay' the mind. Even those aspects of life which are probably common places to most of us are to Lucas startling novelties, because he is never absent-minded. He is always on the alert, quick to receive impressions and ideas from the slightest impact upon his keen sensibilities of the multitudinous world outside. The result is that the most trivial occasions such as finding sixpence in a third-class compartment, or travelling in a carriage with rubber tyres and a pair of horses are enough to set him a-thinking. It

is also this fact that accounts for the amazing productivity in which he stands alone among his contemporaries. And since thought and word are one with him, his pen is the pliant servant of his thought. Often, indeed, his pen has audacity to introduce a subject altogether unsuspected. But that is only a mark of the born essayist, a witness to his creative spontaneity. And even though Lucas may affirm that he is the one mechanical person in his circle, we know that his touch is delicate, fresh, and 'cooling as the wind of the morning across fields of dew.'

Another characteristic to which we should like to draw the reader's attention is his warm humanity. Any one who reads the essay entitled *The Prosecutor* will hardly need to be told so. From the beginning to the end the essay is instinct with pity and tenderness. Under a bright cover of humour it conceals a very real feeling of understanding and compassion. This trait of fundamental sympathy which Lucas evinces more or less in almost every essay reaches its climax in *The Cynosure* where he says: "Show me a really bad man and I will show you a hero: a hero a little distorted it is true, but not much the less heroic for that. Show me a notorious breaker of



male hearts and moral laws and I will show you a heroine: again a little distorted, but with more than the magnetism of the virtuous variety."

Another characteristic of Lucas is his integrity. In spite of his urbanity it will be difficult to find many essayists in England who have his transparency. He is 'a pearl of sincerity and candour.' He shows you all his thoughts; his brain is like a bee-hive under a glass; you can watch its workings. It is impossible to reproach him with being disingenuous, with keeping cards up his sleeves, with not saying openly all that he thinks. In some of his essays, indeed, you come across startling instances of his candour and self-critical integrity. Towards the close of *The Prosecutor*, for example, he confesses that he is no better than the boy—a chronic pilferer at eighteen—whom he prosecuted, especially as he remembers that, 'when I was ten or thereabouts, I stole a pair of boots from the boot-cupboard at home and sold them for eighteenpence to buy a brass cannon.'

Though an incurable Londoner, Lucas has an intense love for the country. Besides, he loves all animals in general; but for horses and dogs he has a strong personal affection. "I have for horses

and dogs," he says himself, "an affection that most people seem to keep for their fellow-men." His love for children is almost unbounded. That is why his descriptions of little boys and little girls, though seldom elaborate, have an ineffable charm of their own. Here is an illustration. "I was," he writes about a certain child, "peculiarly interested in this little boy, because of his eagerness and the radiance which emanated from his clear skin and sunny looks ; he seemed to add to the light of the day, perhaps actually did so."

His love of animals, his love of the country, and his love of children have a common root in his love of all that is simple ; for, in spite of his sophistication, or probably because of it, Lucas has an instinctive preference and a peculiar affection for all those who are ingenuous and childlike. Hence his admiration for Craik, the well-known Shakespeare scholar, of whom Lucas writes that he was "a short and sturdy Irish gentleman, with a large genial grey head stored with odd lore and the best of literature ; and the heart of a child." Hence also his appreciation of Oliver Edwards, Johnson's friend, who lives in literature by virtue of a single remark and takes his place in the shining company of simple souls, the hierarchy of

the ingenuous. Hence also his contempt for Boswell who had no eye for 'children, young or old.' In a word, Lucas loves all that is straightforward, all that is natural, all that is instinctive. All that is simple is for Lucas sheer rapture ; and all that is complicated is for him shorn of its glory.

Lucas is a fatalist. A feeling of destiny is at the bottom of many of his essays. His fatalism, however, is not the outcome of any reasoned philosophy. It is instinctive, the result of his keen sense of the mystery of life. But unlike most fatalists, he is not a pessimist. On the other hand, his temper is remarkable for its cheerfulness which may well be the envy of many a man of letters. His humour is the outcome not only of his sound sense, his strong urbanity, and his warm humanity, but also of a sunny temper which never fails him. It is with him even when he is in tantrums, which, of course, he seldom is, if at all. He seems on the whole peculiarly composed and at peace with the world. He is neither a puritan nor a sentimentalist ; he is an egotist through and through. "The only thing in the world worth being," he says, "is oneself, even with all oneself's limitations." But he is not a self-satisfied prig. On the contrary, he is at times

pathetically conscious of his limitations and, in consequence, he casts wistful looks upon the lives of others whom he regards infinitely superior to his own self. Writing on the life of a conjuror in his essay of the same name, he says towards the close: "What a life! I can think of nothing more pleasant than to live thus, continually mystifying fresh groups of people—with cab fares both ways and a satisfactory fee: to be for ever in the winter months extracting eggs from old gentlemen's beards and little girls' tresses, passing cards right through one's body, catching half-crowns in the air, finding a thousand and one things in tall hats. This is to live indeed, to say nothing of the additional rapture of having a fund of facetiæ that not only ordinary children but the offspring of countesses find irresistible." It is this pensive melancholy that comes over him at times when he thinks that he is not as others are, when he thinks that he is doomed to "being a quill-driver who must keep office-hours," "a tired journalist worn with town," when he thinks that "he is doomed to a life of tedious, mechanical, and intellectual drudgery"—it is this pensive melancholy, we say, that makes Lucas one of the most agreeable egotists in the world. Though not a Bacchanalian, he likes the good

things of the earth when he can get them. He is not a rank vegetarian like Shaw or Shelley, nor is he a member of the Temperance League. He is an Artist whose aim is to taste as much of life as is good for the soul of man. In the world of science he is an alien. He himself writes: "Science being a sealed book to me, I can pass none of its secrets on."

The work of Lucas is remarkable for its uniformity of excellence in matter as well as in manner. Of the latter we shall speak presently. As regards the former, we shall say here that every page of his vast output bears testimony to his profound insight and quiet wisdom. Though his aim is to reveal not his subject but his own personality, to provide not instruction but delectation, every essay is more or less a rich running commentary upon life, so that the reader might gather as he goes posies of precious thought, which have their root in ripe experience. Here are a few taken haphazard from among hundreds of equal merit—

"Strange into how many corners of life the serpent penetrates ! Strange also, what odd events have to occur to put one in the way of learning."

"In the midst of death we are in life. It is all as it should be in this bizarre, jostling world."

"A career of rectitude has sometimes rewards beyond the mere consciousness of virtue."

"The most important thing a great man can do is to be born into the world."

As regards the style of Lucas, it is important to bear in mind that it is remarkable for its brevity, an all-round brevity, brevity in word, brevity in sentence-construction, brevity in the make-up of the whole essay and last, but not least, brevity in thought. He does not crowd his canvas with ideas. In the essay entitled *A London Thrill*, the second and the fifth paragraphs consist of a single simple sentence each. The sixteenth paragraph of *The Prosecutor* consists of 'the Scoundrel' only; and the two concluding paragraphs of the same essay consist of a single phrase and a bare simple sentence respectively. This all-round brevity of Lucas is at times almost astounding. But what is more surprising than this is the fact that he omits nothing that is essential to a proper understanding of his meaning, mood, and intention. In *a London Thrill*, for example, when he tells

us how a pathetic young woman in a long brown overcoat was arrested for having tried just for a few moments too long to enter a house with the result that all London was disorganised, he takes care to give us even the local and the temporal setting of the incident. "The Scene was Gerrard Street," he begins and then follows it up with a vivid snapshot of the Street. He informs us, then, that the "time was three o'clock in the afternoon." In this way Lucas never omits to give the reader every detail which helps him in properly visualising the picture he is out to set forth before him.

With this astonishing brevity Lucas combines the quality of simplicity. His style is remarkable for its clarity and its lucidity. There is no rhetoric, no artifice, no strain. The depths of emotion and the heights of imagination are alike eschewed. There are no purple patches, no 'frills,' nor the strident tones of grand passion or high tragedy. At times, despite himself, he rises to the heights of eloquence, but it is significant that the moment he does so, he restrains himself and comes down to the level of the reader, saying, "I am striking into too high a road." For logical necessity and logical sequence he cares not at all; his method is discursive; there is no French

formality about him. The secret of his charm lies in the fact that he entices the reader into so many bye-paths. His essays give the sense of browsing in a fully informed and liberal mind. He knows that in the matter of expression 'one must not be too clever or too literary,' as Anatole France says. Hence there is in him no 'preciocity,' no far-fetched elaboration of manner or matter, no excess of refinement. While, on the one hand, his style is characterised by scholarly finish and fastidious impeccability, which is really creditable, considering that of all the present-day essayists he is by far the most prolific; on the other, it is simple, colloquial, and idiomatic, approximating more to the spoken than to the written word. His style is, in a word, a model of current cultivated ease of expression and a mirror of the best conversation. There is no solecism, no archaism, no tautology, no pleonasm, no impropriety. There is no needless use of foreign expressions or of classical and slang words. In his essay, entitled *The Conjuror*, he has an occasion to use the familiar Latin proverb, *Finis coronat opus*, but he foregoes the opportunity with deliberate effort and writes: "The end crowns the work (as I could say in Latin if I liked)." Nobody should, however, commit the mistake of imagining that



foreign words and expressions are absolutely excluded. What is true of his use of foreign phrases is also true of his use of slang terms. While he endeavours, as a rule, to avoid them, he does use them occasionally. In his essay entitled *A friend of the town* for instance, he uses the word 'varmint' as a slang for vermin or in *A London Thrill* the word 'pinched' for arrested.

We have already said that Lucas is an incurable Londoner. His love of the great metropolis is nobly attested in the verses :

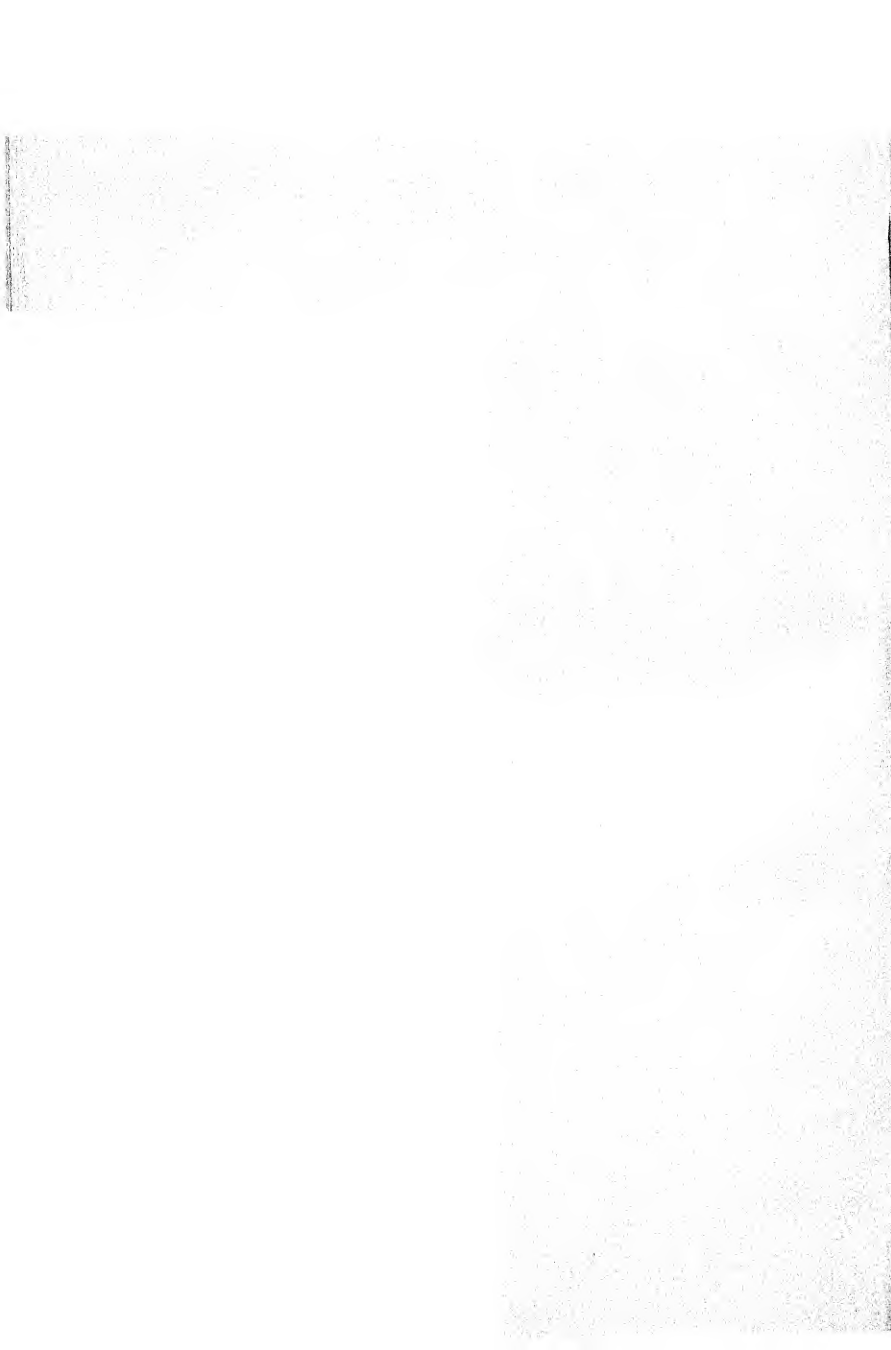
"That's my dear London, that's my true home.  
"I'll never forget it, wherever I roam."

He is familiar with every nook and corner of London life. What we are anxious, however, to emphasise here is not his love or knowledge of London, but the fact that he can employ the dialect and accent of the typical Londoner of the lower classes with perfect ease. He is a consummate master of what is known as the 'Cockney.' In fine, the style of Lucas is terse, not diffused ; pithy, not pointless ; simple, not rhetorical ; spirited, not tame ; light, not ponderous ; and clear, not obscure.

We regard Lucas as one of the greatest essayists of the day, not because he takes us into an unattainable world and keeps us enchanted, but because he is, in spite of his oddities, nearer normal life than any of his contemporaries. He is one of the most genial discursive essayists of our times, exhibiting his ego with all the ecstasy of a collector displaying old curiosities or first editions. His kindly humour entrances us as we journey with him through many worlds, meeting queer and entertaining people whose idiosyncracies were never before portrayed so winningly. His understanding sympathy embraces even the animal world. He knows his job and 'makes even the days of the week take on a new significance;' he makes us feel how even the village path leads to Rome, how things apparently idle and trifling have a royal importance and are the means of opening a new door in our consciousness of what is beautiful and significant.

### SOME WELL-KNOWN POEMS:

- (1) Milton's *Lycidas*.
- (2) Marvell's *Horatian Ode*.
- (3) Wordsworth's *Ode on Immortality*.
- (4) Wordsworth's *Ode to Duty*.
- (5) Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*.
- (6) Coleridge's *Ode to Dejection*.
- (7) Shelley's *Ode to a Skylark*.
- (8) Keats's *Ode to a Nightingale*.
- (9) Keats's *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*.
- (10) Arnold's *The Scholar Gipsy*.



## SOME WELL-KNOWN POEMS.

### 1. Milton's *Lycidas*.

*Lycidas* is a pastoral elegy, that is to say, an elegy in which the expression of grief is done not directly but in accordance with certain well-defined bucolic conventions. The very title of the poem is an indication to this effect, *Lycidas* being the name of the shepherd in the seventh Idyl of Theocritus, and of one of the speakers in the ninth Eclogue of Virgil. Theocritus and Virgil were two of the greatest pastoral poets of antiquity. The name of Moschus also may be added. Thus in these three poets we have the greatest masters of bucolic verse in ancient times. Any medieval or modern poet who attempts pastoral poetry is almost necessarily indebted to them. Nor is Milton an exception. On the contrary, since he was a profound scholar of all classical literature, he is probably even more indebted to these masters than other English poets. Pastoral Poetry which had originated with Theocritus, and which, after widening its scope and range in the hands of Virgil, had fallen out of currency for centuries, was recalled to life during that

general revival of classical learning which we term the Renaissance. The renewed interest in bucolic verse came from Italy. The sixteenth century produced three famous works, written in Italian, which represented different aspects of pastoralism. These were the *Arcadia* of Sannazaro ; Tasso's dramatic pastoral *Aminta* ; and the *Pastor Fido* of Guarini, Tasso's contemporary and rival. These works gave a great vogue to pastoral poetry. Italy was at that time the literary *guru* of Europe, so that these Italian masters of the pastoral soon found imitators in Spain and Portugal, France and England. In England this classical revival of pastoralism first became firmly established with the *Shepherd's Calendar* of Spenser who was long a dominant influence among a certain class of writers, mostly University men, such as Phineas Fletcher with his *Piscatoric Eclogues*, and Browne with his *Britannia's Pastorals*. The *Shepherd's Calendar*, thus, gave a great impetus to the pastoral in England, and that impetus had not died away when Milton wrote his *Lycidas*. In fact, he told Dryden that he regarded himself as the poetical son of Spenser ; and thus it is likely that Spenser's pastoral elegy on his friend, Sir Philip Sidney, entitled *Astrophel*, may have led Milton to fix on the pastoral elegy as the most fitting vehicle of

expressing his own grief at the death of Edward King. We should, therefore, bear in mind, that in the composition of *Lycidas* Milton is indebted not only to Theocritus and Virgil but also to the Italians, Sannazaro, Tasso, and Guarini, and lastly to his acknowledged English master, Spenser, "the poets' poet."

*Lycidas*, then, is a pastoral elegy, one of the three greatest in English poetry, the other two being Shelley's *Adonais* and Arnold's *Thyrsis*. It was composed in the autumn of 1637, and published some time in 1638. It is a memorial poem, a monody on the death of Edward King ; and the circumstances which evoked it are as follows.

Edward King, a Fellow of Christ's College, Cambridge, was lost at sea. He had sailed from Chester for Ireland where most of his relations were settled. His father had held office as Secretary for Ireland under Elizabeth and the two succeeding monarchs. Not far from the British coast the vessel struck on a rock, sprang a leak, and sank. While other passengers were trying to save their lives, Edward King knelt on the deck, and was praying as the ship went down. He was slightly junior to Milton at the University.

He was a scholar of great promise and much beloved. When the news of his death was known at Cambridge, his friends decided to publish a collection of elegiac verses as a semi-official expression of the University's regret at his early death. As a contemporary and friend of Edward King at Christ's College, and already a poet of some note, Milton was naturally asked to contribute to the volume. The Anthology was published in the spring of 1638, and consisted of twenty-three elegiac poems in Latin and Greek, and thirteen in English. Among the contributors were Henry More, Joseph Beaumont, Cleveland, and other men of note. Milton's poem is the last in the English section; but any lover of poetry would gladly exchange the whole collection for five lines of *Lycidas*.

*Lycidas*, then, is an elegy in pastoral form on the death of Edward King, a fellow of Christ's College, Cambridge, who had been a student there at the same time as Milton, and who was drowned while crossing from Chester Bay to Dublin, his ship having struck a rock and foundered in calm weather.

A word about the metrical structure of *Lycidas*.



It is written in lines of irregular length grouped in what Prof. Masson happily calls "free musical paragraphs," in which the rhythm and cadence of the verses wonderfully respond to the changing moods and themes that follow in rapid succession. The rhymes are so skilfully interlaced that even a careful reader may fail to notice that some lines are left without any rhyme at all. The rhymes, then, no less than the lines, are extremely irregular. The general movement which is prevailingly iambic pentameter is diversified by the introduction of shorter lines. Each stanza or paragraph introduces and treats of a separate theme. *Lycidas*, in short, is a triumph of varied metre. It is one of the most musical of English poems. The source whence Milton learnt this device of mixing longer lines with shorter verses is probably Italian poetry as it was practised in the hands of Tasso and Guarini. Referring to *Lycidas*, Landor says, "No poetry so harmonious had ever been written in our language, but in the same free metre both Tasso and Guarini had captivated the ear of Italy."

"In *Lycidas*," says Mark Pattison, we have reached the high-water mark of English Poesy and of Milton's own production." In it Milton has surpassed all previous English elegies almost as

easily as in *Comus* he had surpassed all the earlier masks. With the great passages of *Paradise Lost* it stands as the most perfect combination of erudition and imagination in Milton and therefore in all English poetry.

In its imagery and arrangement it conforms not only to the pastoral models of Theocritus and Virgil, which the Italian Renaissance poets had revived, and Spenser had introduced into England, but also to medieval models, consciously or unconsciously, combining as it does, realism and idealism, Paganism and Christianity, with no sense of inconsistency. It opens with an invocation to the Muses who dwell by the well that springs beneath the seat of Jove, but we hear also the dread voice of the 'Pilot of the Galilean Lake ;' and *Lycidas* is not only a shepherd of bucolic Arcadia but also a type of the true pastors of the Christian Church, just as the god Pan, in medieval legend, sometimes represents the Christ. Neither the manner nor the metre of *Lycidas* is original, "and yet it is pure and undiluted Milton, with the signet of his peculiar mind and temper stamped on its every phrase." It is composed of conceptions the most heterogeneous that it is possible to heap together, and yet it is a consummate triumph. It breathes

alike the spirit of the Reformation and the Renaissance. It is a rare blend of Hellenism and Hebraism. The fire of patriotic passion bursts through the pastoral convention, and the prophet's warning voice is heard above the poet's. Milton's original picturesque vein is here for the first time crossed with a passion which is stern, determined, and indicative of his resolution to do or die. The fanaticism of the Covenanter joins hands with the sad grace of Petrarch. The splendid gaiety of the cavalier meets the solemn austerity of the Puritan. Marvellous must be the art with which the presiding but invisible genius of the poet blends all these opposites into one harmonious whole. The amazing music of *Lycidas*, its sensuous, imaginative, and spiritual intensity drowns all incongruities in a flood of poetic life. Prof. Stopford Brooke writes: "One of its strange charms is its solemn undertone rising like a religious chaunt through the elegiac music; the sense of a stern national crisis in the midst of its pastoral mourning; the sense of Milton's grave force of character among the flowers and fancies of the poem; the sense of the Christian religion pervading the classical imagery. We might say that these things are ill-fitted to each other. So they would be, were not the art so fine and the poetry so over-

mastering ; were they not fused together by genius into a whole, so that the unfitness itself becomes fascination." The secret of the poem lies in its amazing verbal and emotional suggestiveness. It is not so much an elegy, a song of grief, as a monument carved by a great Renaissance artist to the memory of a friend. Its modesty too is astonishing. Milton had already written one of the stateliest odes in the language, the *Nativity Ode* ; he had already written two of the finest idylls in English poetry, *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* ; he had already written the greatest mask in English literature, namely *Comus* ; and yet he fancies himself still unripe for poetry and is only forced, as he says, by the bitter constraint of the death of his friend to pluck the berries of his laurel, which seem to him still 'harsh and crude.' And that over-powering emotion which compelled him to begin is felt throughout, so that "there is no poem of Milton in which he appears to make so complete a surrender to the changing moods of passion." At times we feel, indeed, that the pastoral mould is too fragile to hold all that he wants to put into it. The great outburst of St. Peter, with its undisguised assault upon the Laudian Clergy, strains it almost to bursting. Yet no one would wish it away ; for it adds a

passage of Miltonic fire to a poem which without it would be a little too plaintive to be fully characteristic of Milton whose peculiar genius lay rather in strength than in tenderness. "To be weak is to be miserable" is his most distinctive message to mankind.

No criticism of *Lycidas* is complete without a mention of Johnson's notorious attack upon it. He writes: "One of the poems on which much praise has been bestowed is *Lycidas* ; of which the diction is harsh, the rhymes uncertain, and the numbers displeasing...It is not to be considered as the effusion of real passion ; for passion runs not after remote allusions and obscure opinions. Passion plucks no berries from the myrtle and ivy, nor calls upon Arethuse and Mincius, nor tells of rough satyrs and fauns with cloven heel. Where there is leisure for fiction there is little grief, for there is no truth ; there is no art, for there is nothing new. Its form is that of a pastoral, easy, regular, and therefore disgusting....Among the flocks, and copses, and flowers, appear the heathen deities ; Jove and Phœbus, Neptune and Æolus, with a long train of mythological imagery, such as a College easily supplies.....This poem has yet a grosser fault.

With these trifling fictions are mingled the most awful and sacred truths, such as ought never to be polluted with such irreverent combinations." The only value of this notorious passage is that it indicates with absolute certainty the limitations of its author. So long as Johnson is free of the fashion, he shows an almost invincible common-sense which continually leads him aright in his critical excursions. But when the conventions of his age come into conflict with his judgment, they are sure to carry him into their own lobby: he is bound to vote for the methods in which he was trained from his youth up. The pastoral machinery of Milton's is out of date; and Johnson, great, glorious, eloquent child of his age, is forced to follow where the fashions of his time lead him. Secondly he was entirely insensible to the beauties of nature. He hated pastoral poetry as a whole, and had a personal distaste for sheep: "an intelligent reader," he said, "sickens at the mention" of them. Thirdly, he had no ear for subtle music. Only an extremely regular and almost mathematical beat of verse had any chance with him. Fourthly, Johnson did not like Cambridge men. Fifthly, he was Royalist; whereas Milton was an ardent Republican. Sixthly, like all the rest of his generation, he applies to poetry the tests of prose.

Lastly, he frequently forgot that truth of fact was not identical with truth of art. No wonder, therefore, that Dr. Johnson totally failed to assess at its proper value the artistic, emotional, imaginative, and spiritual beauty of *Lycidas*. Its "eloquent distress," as Keats so accurately calls it, is, it is true, not passionately personal, but neither is it unreal. The poem is a work of consummate art, and is, in the words of Prof. Saintsbury, "absolutely proof against criticism. There cannot be better verse than *Lycidas*."

## 2. Marvell's *Horatian Ode*.

Milton's friend and colleague in the Latin Secretaryship during the Protectorate of Cromwell, Andrew Marvell, who was like him a poet and a puritan, a patriot, a controversialist, and a keen classical scholar, wrote a single ode, the *Horatian Ode upon Cromwell's Return from Ireland*, but achieved such splendid success in it that on the strength of this poem alone he occupies a high and permanent place in the history of the ode in English verse. "Better than anything else in our language," says Goldwin Smith, "this poem gives an idea of a grand Horatian measure, as well as of the diction and spirit of an Horatian

ode." Like many of the great political odes of Horace, it is written in stanzas of four lines, in which a four-foot is followed by a three-foot couplet, a device which is happily employed to give the effect of one of the most difficult classical metres, the Alcaic stanza. The only un-Horatian feature of the form is that, unlike Horace, Marvell uses rhyme. Professor Quiller-Couch, commenting upon this, says that "in Marvell's stanza—

Nor called the gods with vulgar spite  
To vindicate his helpless right ;  
But bowed his comely head  
Down, as upon a bed—

we do in sense and sound get the Horatian falling close almost perfectly suggested. Yes: but not quite perfectly, I think. For why? Because the ear is all the while attending for the rhyme—'head,' 'bed.' That is the nuisance with rhyme: it can hardly help suggesting the epigram, the clinch, the verse 'brought off' with a little note of triumph. In rhyme you cannot quite 'cease upon the midnight with no pain.' Your ear expects the correspondent, and 'you are not quite happy until you get it.' " In this respect Collin's *Ode to Evening*, another splendid example of the Horatian ode, is better than Marvell's, since it is



unrhymed and is therefore free from epigrammatic clinches. There, if anywhere in English poetry, you have the secret of Horace's 'falling close' perfectly understood and rendered. In spite of rhyme, however, Marvell's ode is the most Horatian poem outside Horace. It is Horatian not only in its metrical form but also in its style which is distinguished by that sententious brevity, dignity, charm, and felicity of phrase reached by studious care and not by lucky inspiration, which are characteristic of the Roman poet in his great political odes. Nor is that all. It is Horatian also in its close-packed thought, in its never-failing tone of urbanity, and in its enlightened spirit of moderation and impartiality. The poet admires the reserve and austerity, the industrious valour, the shrewd wisdom, the inexorable justice, and the strong democratic sense and political sagacity of Cromwell, besides looking upon him with awe as the Man of Destiny or the grand instrument of Fate ; but he is not a regicide like Milton, and no finer tribute has ever been paid to Charles I. than the one contained in the well-known stanzas :

He nothing common did or mean  
Upon that memorable scene,

But with his keener eye  
The axe's edge did try ;

Nor called the gods with vulgar spite  
To vindicate his helpless right,  
But bowed his comely head  
Down, as upon a bed.

It is rather strange that the death of the king should be so nobly sung in an ode which is written on Cromwell and is dedicated to his genius. Augustine Birrell rightly remarks that this famous ode is not a mere panegyric of the Protector and that its true hero is the "Royal actor," whom Cromwell, as the poem suggests, lured to his doom. Besides, it is on the stanzas which have a bearing on the king that the great popularity of this ode undoubtedly depends.

It should be noticed that the poem has throughout a stately versification and a sober, solemn thought. It is free alike from the prejudice of the partisan and the adulation of the courtier, from the scream of the fanatic and the fury of the bigot. "Entire self-possession, dignity, criticism of a great man and a strange career by one well entitled to criticise, are among the chief

characteristics of this noble poem," says Augustine Birrell.

There are some who doubt its authorship. The only man, apart from Marvell, whom we can imagine to have written it is Milton. And this notion is strengthened by the fact that the versification is stately and the thought sober and solemn like Milton's and that the style bears a striking resemblance to that of Milton. It is full of classical constructions and inversions in the Miltonic manner. The use of concrete images in stanza second to suggest the abstract idea that fame is now to be won by men of action like Cromwell rather than by men of letters may be compared with Milton's in his great *Nativity Ode* :

"No war, or battle's sound  
Was heard the world around :  
The idle spear and shield were high uphung ;  
The hooked chariot stood  
Unstain'd with hostile blood ;  
The trumpet spake not to the armed throng ;  
And kings sat still with awful eye,  
As if they surely knew their sovran Lord was by."

On account of all these resemblances, Palgrave justly observes that this ode is "more in Milton's

style than has been reached by any other poet." But while these considerations undoubtedly lend support to the scepticism concerning the authorship of this noble ode, we maintain that to ascribe it to Milton is highly uncritical and betrays a lack of proper insight into the character and poetic genius of Milton and Marvell alike. Milton was a partisan with all the prejudices proper to a man who is strongly devoted to his own faction, and, as such, he was unable to understand or to judge fairly of others. Narrowness was the most serious drawback of his character, and no writer in prose or verse has ever had in greater measure than he and hardly any has been able to express with more varied and exquisite harmony that intense individuality which often accompanies narrowness. Marvell's ode lacks this intensity of individuality which is so characteristic of Milton. Besides, Milton was a frank regicide and in his *Defences of the English People* he openly approved of the king's execution. He could not have or would not have sung so nobly of the king's death as Marvell does in his poem. Milton's was a strong, fiery nature. Whenever he has an occasion in his poetry to refer to persons belonging to the opposite camp, he pours on them the burning coals of his indignation and forgets even

the claims of urbanity. But it is evident that the ode in question is marked by urbanity which is truly Horatian. Moreover, we believe that, if Milton had written the poem, it would have been couched in a loftier strain and a more elaborate metre. Lastly, we have the evidence of Marvell's editor, Captain Edward Thompson, who published the ode along with his other poems in 1776, and who said that he had found it copied in a book, subsequently destroyed, which contained poems written in Marvell's own handwriting, and that this book was given him (the editor) by Mr. Robert Nettelton, a grand-nephew of the poet. And we agree with Augustine Birrell who says that no student of Marvell wants more evidence than this to satisfy him that the *Horatian Ode* is as surely his as the lines upon *Appleton House*, the *Bermudas*, *To His Coy Mistress*, and *The Garden*. It is the greatest poem of Marvell and it will be sheer injustice and also ingratitude to his memory to rob him of his best. Except that there is an occasional obscurity of style which is the result of the poet's zeal to imitate the condensed Latin syntax it is a perfect poem of its kind. Dean Trench says: "To one unacquainted with Horace, this Ode.....will give a truer notion of the kind of greatness which he achieved than could, so far

as I know, be obtained from any other poem in our language." It is written with great spirit, and yet at the same time with such restraint that it attains classical quality and recalls to our mind Horace's larger odes in praise of Augustus. It has a strong, deep, and resonant music ; and harshness and abruptness are not avoided, for they are in conformity with the theme.

3. Wordsworth's *Ode on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*.

The Ode on Immortality is Wordsworth's highest achievement in poetry. It was published in 1807 and it took three years for its composition ; the first four stanzas were written in 1803, the rest two years later. It is an epitome of the peculiar philosophy of Wordsworth. The poet uses the Platonic doctrine of pre-natal existence as a premiss. The soul comes into earthly life, not as a blank, as Lockian empiricism declared, but endowed with divine instincts and powers. Mundane and temporal interests, however, encroach upon these, but they cannot wholly stifle them. Even amid the distractions of the world the "shadowy recollections" of childhood mystically attest our divine origin and destiny. It is

not, however, its philosophy which has given it a permanent place in the hearts of men. It is its poetic beauty, the spell of its magic rhythm, the charm of its enchanted vision, the splendour of its haunting music, and the grace and grandeur of its consecrated imagery. We may accept or reject the Platonic doctrine of pre-existence which it advances, but its imaginative appeal is irresistible. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that it is not only the topmost poem of Wordsworth but also the greatest irregular ode in the English language. Indeed, Lord Houghton goes even to the extent of calling it "the greatest poem in the English language;" while Principal Shairp says that it "marks the highest limit which the tide of poetic inspiration has reached in England" since the days of Milton; and Emerson said that "*The Ode on Immortality* is the high-water mark which the intellect has reached in this age." Not that it is absolutely flawless; it is not sustained on an equal level throughout; the third and fourth stanzas contain some false rhymes and jiggling, nay, almost skittish measures; and the apostrophe to the child in the eighth stanza is a sort of mental bombast. But, as a whole, this great ode has a majesty of harmonious language and movement which reminds us of the "mighty-mouthed inventor of harmonies,"

and even Milton, we must say, never rhymed a period of such compass and so exalted as that which begins with "O joy! that in our embers."

Here is a brief analysis of this great Ode. The first two stanzas embody a contrast between the beauty of Nature as seen in childhood, when everything seemed apparelled in celestial light, and the same sights in manhood when, though the sense of beauty remains, the visionary ideal charm is gone. The next two stanzas develop this idea further. Amid the beauty of spring the heart cannot but respond to the universal joy, but several objects of Nature remind it that there has passed away a glory from the earth. The fifth stanza traces the progress of life from birth to manhood, and accounts for the loss of that visionary gleam with which even the common sights of Nature were invested in childhood. The dreamlike splendour which objects of sight put on in childhood is presumptive evidence of a prior state of existence. Our birth is but a sleep between our previous and our present existences, in which the past is forgotten. But yet our soul, which is the guiding star of our life, does not come from vacuum in entire self-oblivion and utter nakedness, but from God who is our home, and with clouds



of glory trailing behind it. And that is why in infancy we bear in us most clearly the traces of our heavenly origin; traces which fade away before advancing manhood. In the sixth stanza the poet says that Mother Earth tries her best to console her foster-child, Man, in his loss and make him forget with her own pleasures the glories he has known and that imperial palace whence he came. This is exemplified in the seventh stanza which traces the overshadowing of the growing mind by the occupations and ambitions of ordinary life; and in the eighth stanza the poet laments the disillusion which follows such an overshadowing of the mind. Even the infant, forgetful of his high descent and calling, imitates the occupations of his elders and seeks to anticipate the bonds of custom, heavy as frost and deep almost as life. In the ninth stanza Wordsworth says that, in spite of all this, man retains the power of reminiscence, which preserves his sense of the dreamlike glory of his earlier years, and is an incentive to joy in later life. There remain with us some records of our heavenly childhood; the memory not only of its innocence and hope, its delight and liberty, but also of that feeling of the unreality of the external world which comes back upon us in our highest moods and tells us of our spiritual origin. The tenth stanza renews

the theme of the third and fourth stanzas. The happiness which the spring morning awakens is not fruitless. It shows that, though the first fine careless rapture of childhood cannot be recaptured, a quiet delight remains, and the years, with their teaching, have brought compensations. In the later part of the tenth stanza and in the concluding stanza these compensations are specified. They are sympathy with mankind, wisdom that is born of suffering, faith that is unshaken even by death, and lastly that philosophic calm which a man acquires only after he has gone through all the ups and downs of life. "Therefore I can still rejoice in Nature," says Wordsworth; "for, though I see no more the vivid splendours of my childhood, the loss is more than compensated for by the human sympathies of riper years, through which I see new and nobler meanings in the beauty of even the humblest flower."

It is obvious from this brief analysis that the central theme of the Ode is that with the passing of childhood many of the soul's possessions necessarily pass away, but its essential nature does not pass away. And the divine character of these early possessions and their power to remain even in the midst of change indicate a heavenly

pre-existence and a future immortality. There are three stages in the evolution of this theme: the attitude of the child towards Nature; the loss of this attitude, that mature life experiences; and the spiritual possessions that remain permanent—"the strength in what remains behind." And Wordsworth's supreme gift to the world is that he interprets Nature through the experiences of life and the heart of man.

The eighth stanza is a stumbling-block to many students. They fail to understand how a mere child can be the "best philosopher," the "mighty prophet," and the "seer blest." In his *Theology in the English Poets* Stopford Brooke helps to elucidate the point. He writes: "Wordsworth intended to say that the child, having lately come from a perfect existence, in which he saw truth directly, and was at home with God, retains, unknown to us, that vision—and, because he does, is the best philosopher, since he sees at once that which we through philosophy are endeavouring to reach; is the mighty prophet because in his actions and speech he tells unconsciously the truths that he sees, but the sight of which we have lost; is more closely haunted by God, more near to the immortal life, more purely and brightly

free because he half shares in the pre-existent life and glory out of which he has come."

This magnificent ode, as we have already said, is not altogether free from defects. To the defects already mentioned we may add one or two more. The lament in the first four stanzas verges on the sentimental and is, therefore, neither characteristic nor worthy of Wordsworth who is pre-eminently the poet of "joy in widest commonalty spread." The sixth and seventh stanzas in which he represents Mother Earth as trying to make Man forget the glories he has known are not in harmony with the spirit of a true Nature poet like Wordsworth. Besides, there are here and there, as Arnold rightly says, traces of declamatory efforts on the part of the poet to lift himself to the height of his great argument ; so that in comparison with other poems of Wordsworth the *Ode* is wanting somewhat in simplicity, naturalness, and a certain indefinable grace. Moreover, there are abrupt transitions from one part of the theme to another ; and the reader is hard put to it to trace the logical evolution of thought ;—the transition from the seventh to the eighth stanza or from the eighth to the ninth stanza, for example. The *Ode* is structurally

defective also ; for instead of being a circle with one centre of thought it is an ellipse with two centres, one, a plausible centre, in the fifth stanza, and the other, the real centre, in the ninth stanza. And this plausible centre is created, because the poet dwells too long on the Platonic doctrine of Pre-existence. It is this defect in structure which has put many critics off the scent, so that instead of regarding the idea of pre-existence as only one element and that also a subordinate element in our instinct of immortality they consider it the main element, ignore the idea of memory, 'the thought of our past years,' upon which the ode is essentially based and thus misinterpret the whole poem. In fact, Wordsworth himself says in his note on Pre-existence: "It is far too shadowy a notion to be recommended to faith as more than an element in our instinct of immortality...Having to wield some of the mind's elements when I was impelled to write this poem on the Immortality of the Soul, I took hold of the notion of pre-existence as having sufficient foundation in humanity for authorising me to make for my purpose the best use of it I could as a poet."

In spite of all these defects, however,

Wordsworth has obtained a wider hearing through this ode than through any other of his poems. And this is due to the fact that the poet has here followed the golden mean between the conventions of poetry as an art and the glorious independence of his own mind. The artistic device of contrast, for instance, is used with magnificent effect. The poet begins in a note of lamentation and ends in a note of exultation. In the opening stanzas the poet laments the loss of that celestial light, that visionary power which he possessed in childhood and which transformed for him even the most commonplace things of nature into objects of dreamlike and ideal splendour. In the closing stanzas he exults in the strength that remains behind—

“O joy ! that in our embers  
Is something that doth live,  
That nature yet remembers  
What was so fugitive !”

Thus the victory of the soul is heightened by contrast against its temporary losses. Again, spiritual life is contrasted against physical life, and the heavenly against the earthly. The world is regarded as a dungeon whose dark shades

close in upon the soul. Mere earthly pleasures deepen the prison gloom. But spiritual powers within the mind itself oppose this encroachment of mundane interests. They overcome the tendencies of our mere mortal nature and remind us of our heavenly origin and divine destiny. Another artistic device besides contrast is that of personification which gives us wonderful pictures that stamp themselves indelibly on the reader's mind, as in the lines—

“The Moon doth with delight  
Look round her when the heavens are bare ;”

“The cataracts blow their trumpets from the  
steep,”

“I hear the Echoes through the mountains  
throng,  
The Winds come to me from the fields of  
sleep,”

“And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore.”

The only other poem of Wordsworth which can challenge comparison with his *ode* is *Lines composed above Tintern Abbey*. But there is in

the *ode* a deeper humanity and a larger scope of movement; and though less personal in form of expression, it penetrates deeper into the secrets of human power and human faith. "In both the poems the human qualities of memory and faith are interwoven in close affinity. But in the *Ode* they are more intimately related to the main theme. Indeed, memory and faith, bound together by the power of the central Will, furnish the whole foundation of the poem. By means of these faculties the mind travels backward through childhood and birth and forward through age and death into a transcendental world. The philosophic significance of the poem is that in it the two great ideas of immanence and transcendence meet and are held in perfect balance by the law of continuity."

#### 4. Wordsworth's *Ode to Duty*.

The *Ode to Duty* was written in 1805 and published in the *Poems* of 1807. This *Ode* is on the model of Gray's *Ode to Adversity* which is copied from Horace's *Ode to Fortune*. Wordsworth prefixed a Latin motto to the *Ode*, which means "Good no longer of deliberate intent but brought by the guidance of habit to such a point that not



only can I act rightly, but cannot act otherwise than rightly."

The Ode is not only a fine illustration of Wordsworth's faith that the poet should be a moral teacher, it is also a living and concrete refutation of the old notion that 'didactic poetry is a mistake.' Moral teaching is not by itself unpoetic; what makes it so is the lack of passion and imagination. But when it is infused with passion and imagination and is also married to immortal music, it rises to the heights of genuine poetry. The *Ode to Duty* is a great poem, because it is instinct with emotion and its attendant imagination and also because its diction is chaste, lucid, and melodious. The soundness of its philosophy, moreover, makes it an extremely valuable poem for mankind.

Aubrey de Vere in his excellent book, *Essays Chiefly on Poetry*, gives the sum and substance of the Ode in the following words:

"It affirms that between the lower and higher sections of man's nature there commonly exists an antagonism, and that the condition of man's life is a militant condition. A few happier spirits may

stand outside the battle, and, led on by an inner law of unconscious goodness, may, at least for an indefinite period, advance along a flower-strewn path of virtue: but even these are insecure; the path of virtue is, for the most part, a rough and thorny path, and the children of men can only find peace while they tread it in obedience to a Law challenging them from above. To find true freedom they must subject themselves to a noble bondage...

"The chief excellence of this poem, in its moral learnings, consists in the absolute spontaneousness of its 'good confession' that Duty is the one thing that gives dignity to life. The poet does not speak of the excess into which human nature falls when apart from such a guide, but of 'omissions':

'I deferred

The task imposed, from day to day.'

It is in the 'quietness of Thought' that he repudiates the 'unchartered freedom' which tires, and demands instead the liberating yoke of that subjection which is at once 'victory and law'. He looks around him, and from every side the same lesson is borne in upon him. It is because they obey law that the flowers return in their seasons

and the stars revolve in their courses ; the law of Nature is to inanimate things what Duty is to man. The peasant who had only half learned his lesson in science might imagine that the law of gravitation was but a burden that binds man to earth. The philosopher knows that amid the boundless fields of creation it is that which gives to everything its proper place, its motion, and its rest."

The *Ode to Duty* is one of the finest specimens of the Regular ode in English poetry. It is sufficiently enthusiastic or exalted in its strain ; it is directed to a fixed purpose ; and it deals progressively with a dignified theme. In addition to its dignity or exaltation of matter and manner and a logical evolution of thought, it is also marked by a certain amount of complexity and elaboration ; it has something of the quality of a poetical oration. Besides, it is not acutely personal in its tone ; and it begins with an invocation to

"Stern Daughter of the Voice of God."

It illustrates, thus, almost all the salient features of the ode as a variety of lyrical poetry.

It is as we have said, a Regular ode, because

it observes a definite structural scheme in its stanzaic arrangement. Every stanza consists of eight lines. Every line, except the last, consists of four iambic feet, so that the accent falls normally on the second syllable of every foot. The last line of every stanza is what is technically known as an "Alexandrine," that is, a line consisting of six iambic feet, so called because of its use in old French poems on Alexander, the Great. In the first four lines of every stanza the rhymes are arranged alternately ; while in the concluding four lines they are arranged in succession, so that the fifth line rhymes with the sixth and the seventh with the eighth. And lastly every stanza contains four rhymes.

The poem is important in as much as it affords a striking revelation of the poet's personality. We learn from it that Wordsworth is the poet of Duty, unlike Keats, the poet of Beauty. We learn from it that Wordsworth is the poet of Law, unlike Byron and Shelley who are preeminently poets of Liberty. We learn from it that Wordsworth was "no sport to every random gust"; but that, on the other hand, he was a dedicated spirit, consecrated to the service of that Power that keeps the stars in their courses and which impells all

thinking things and all objects of all thought; that he shaped his life in accordance with the principles of Love and Joy and Duty; and that he lived his life in the spirit of self-sacrifice and in the light of Truth. We learn from it that Wordsworth is the poet of peace, of "the quietness of thought," to use his own words. Poetry was for him not the expression of any "purple riot" or any commotion of the heart; it was "emotion recollected in tranquillity." That is why there hangs over the work of Wordsworth an atmosphere of serene calm, 'the silence that is among the lonely hills,' the stillness that is among the silent stars. We must bear in mind, however, that the tranquillity of Wordsworth is not the negation of passion; it is the very culmination of emotion, and it is the outcome of that inner harmony which he had evolved in his own life.

Between the last three stanzas of Wordsworth's greatest poem, *Intimations of Immortality* and the *Ode to Duty* there is a close parallel in thought, though, of course, the latter does not approach the sublimity of the former, and is also more restricted in scope, since it does not aim to look "through death" to an ultimate future, and also because it does not accentuate the law of

continuity. But it reveals even more intensely the principles of immanence and transcendence. It exalts the starry heavens above and the moral law within. Feeling the "weight of chance desires" and of "unchartered freedom," the poet supplements "the genial sense of youth" by the guidance of the law of Duty. With an absolute self-surrender the poet calls upon the 'awful Power' to the humble function of living within himself and becoming to him a permanent guide :

"Give unto me, made lowly wise,  
The spirit of self-sacrifice ;  
The confidence of reason give ;  
And in the light of Truth thy Bondman let  
me live."

### 5. Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*.

*Kubla Khan* was first published in the *Christabel* volume of 1816. It is a master-piece of the type of poetry which depends entirely for its success upon the pure pleasure it gives to the reader by beauty of form, colour, and varying rhythm. The circumstances of its composition are interesting. Early in the summer of 1798

Coleridge was staying at a lonely farm-house between Porlock and Linton, on the Exmoor confines of Somerset and Devonshire. He says that he was at that time in ill-health, and while reading an old book of travel called *Purchas his Pilgrimage* after taking a dose of opium, fell asleep in his chair. During a three hours' sleep, 'at least of the external senses,' he composed a poem of not less than two or three hundred lines, the principal theme of which was suggested by the last sentence his waking eyes had seen in the book mentioned above. Here is the sentence referred to, which we have modernised for the student's convenience: "In Xamdu did Kubla Khan build a stately Palace, encompassing sixteen miles of plain ground with a wall, wherein are fertile meadows, pleasant Springs, delightful Streams, and all sorts of beasts of chase and game, and in the midst thereof a sumptuous house of pleasure." Of this composition Coleridge appeared on waking to remember the whole, and at once began to write it out. But unfortunately he was interrupted by a caller or visitor on business from Porlock, who detained him above an hour, and, on returning to his room, Coleridge found, to his no small surprise and mortification, that though he still retained some vague and dim recollection of the

general purport of the vision, yet, with the exception of some eight or ten scattered lines and images, all the rest had passed away like the images on the surface of a stream into which a stone has been cast, but, alas! without the after restoration of the latter.'

*Kubla Khan*, then, is a mere fragment ; it is incomplete, and this fact should be borne in mind when we judge of it as a poem. Nobody, for instance, should have the folly to say that it leads us nowhere except to a sunless sea. From the philosophical standpoint the poem is no more than a psychological curiosity. We may all have a similar experience, but the wonder in Coleridge's case was that his brain retained the word-impressions sufficiently long to enable him to commit them, to the extent at least of some fifty odd lines, to paper, and that, according to his own belief, this is but a mere fraction of what but for an unlucky interruption in the work of transcribing he would have been able to preserve.

*Kubla Khan* is a wild dream-poem ; and therefore, its imagery is appropriately characterised by a picturesque vagueness or by a misty vividness. The completeness of its metrical form is simply



remarkable. *The Ancient Mariner* and the first part of *Christabel* are unique in their kind, but even they do not approach *Kubla Khan* in point of an unearthly kind of music. Stopford Brooke rightly remarks that, though a fragment, "*Kubla Khan* is even beyond them in melody." Indeed, 'it stands alone for melody in English poetry,' he further adds. The poem does not also belong to human life; the poet rises in it to that subtilised imaginative world of thought, half-supernatural, half-natural, which was special to Coleridge, and which pervades *The Ancient Mariner* and *Christabel* in particular.

Let the student read the poem with sympathy and see for himself whether he cannot appreciate its unearthly music, its wild witchery of sound, its beautiful natural scenery over which enchantment and romance hover with their twilight wings, its alliteration, both explicit and implicit, the flashing eyes of the wizard Coleridge playing over it, his floating hair streaming over it, its rapture, its mingled measure of the fountain and the caves, the dancing rocks, the sinuous rills, its tumult and its tranquillity, and, in the midst of all, that he of dead ancestors with their prophetic unconsummate regard this poem, indeed, as a test

capacity to appreciate poetry. If he does not appreciate *Kubla Khan*, he will never appreciate poetry, except, it may be, for its unpoetic qualities, its philosophy, its criticism of life, its ethical wisdom, its historical or allegorical significance and all that sort of thing. The student should bear in mind that Poetry is not Wisdom, nor is it Truth ; it is the rose on truth's lips, the light in Wisdom's eyes.

The metre of *Kubla Khan* is irregular and plastic ; there is no verse-division ; the length of the line changes ; and the rhyme pattern also varies. All these metrical features of the poem fall in felicitously with the peculiar circumstances of its composition. There is much effective alliteration, notably in the lines :

“As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted  
By woman wailing for her demon-lover :”

“Five miles meandering with a mazy motion.”

therefor “A damsel with a dulcimer.”

by a picture

The completeness of the *e* sounds in the first two lines

quoted above heighten the metrical effect. The last line has a nimble movement of its own; and the skill by which the light vowel-sounds are made to contribute to the effect of lightness is almost uncanny. Coleridge was, indeed, an accomplished metrical artist. Prof. Saintsbury says: "Coleridge was a metrist such as we have not more than five or six even in English poetry, and could colour and harmonise language, in such a way that, at his best, not Shakespeare himself is his superior, and hardly any one else his equal." In this unique lyric, *Kubla Khan*, descriptive of imaginative landscape, an English poet has at last conquered, says Theodore Watts-Dunton, the crowning difficulty of writing in irregular metres. "Having broken away from all restraints of couplet and stanza, having caused his rhymes and pauses to fall just where and just when the emotion demands that they should fall, scorning the exigencies of makeshift no less than the exigencies of stanza,—he has found, what every writer of irregular English odes has sought in vain, a music as entrancing, as natural, and at the same time as inscrutable, as the music of the winds or of the sea." Verily may it be said of Coleridge that he was a superb dreamer of dreams and a consummate maker of music.

6. Coleridge's *Dejection : An Ode*.

Coleridge's Ode to *Dejection* was written in 1802. It is an extremely pathetic expression of some of the causes of Coleridge's failure as a poet. Various reasons have been assigned for Coleridge's failure in poetry. Some think that it was the inevitable outcome of his habit of taking opium ; others that it was the consequence of his congenital weakness of will ; and still others that it was the result of the lack in him of any sure anchorage in home affections. All these causes go, of course, a long way in explaining the failure. But there is a more serious cause revealed by the poet himself in this Ode : it is his natural tendency towards abstraction. Coleridge was endowed with two inborn gifts which were at war with each other—the gift of poetic imagination and the gift of metaphysical speculation. Up to the year 1799 it was the former gift which was in the ascendant, with the result that he succeeded in rendering all his intellectual conceptions or abstractions in terms of concrete representation, imaginative suggestion, and profound emotion. His poetic imagination was strengthened by two feelings which he regarded as essential for purposes of artistic creation—Joy and Hope. "Work

without Hope draws nectar in a sieve," he says;  
and

"Joy, Lady ! is the spirit and the power,  
Which, wedding Nature to us, gives in dower,  
A new Earth and new Heaven."

But after the year 1799 these two indispensable allies of poetic creation departed, with the result that his original natural impulse to abstraction, confirmed by his study of German metaphysics, asserted itself completely and deprived him of his "shaping spirit of imagination," so that abstruse research and speculation became his sole resource, his only plan :

"Till that which suits a part infects the whole,  
And now is almost grown the habit of my soul."

Thus the poet within Coleridge was killed by the philosopher within him.

There is another point of importance about this ode. It is the fullest expression to be found in Coleridge's poetry of the Transcendental principle. The spiritual life of Coleridge may be broadly divided into two parts, with the year

1798-99—the period of his visit to Germany—as the point of division. In the first part he is a Necessitarian and a Unitarian Christian; in the second he is a Transcendentalist. In the first period his poetry is the expression chiefly of the conception that God at the centre of everything predetermines and regulates all physical and mental life into a kind of universal harmony or unity. So long as his mind was governed by this twofold conception of Necessity and Unity he was a poet; but when he became a Transcendentalist he ceased to be a poet, as many circumstances conspired to deprive him of his “shaping spirit of Imagination.” His most characteristic poems, such as *The Ancient Mariner* and *Christabel* are, therefore, the expressions of his necessitarianism and his unitarianism. From a thorough-going Necessitarian, however, he later became a radical Transcendentalist. Now, when we talk of Coleridge’s failure in poetry, we simply mean that he was not able to render his transcendentalism in terms of concrete representation, suggestive imagination, and deep feeling. We have no poem from him in which his transcendentalism finds as triumphant an expression as his Necessitarian-unitarianism finds in *The Ancient Mariner*. His *Ode to Dejection* occupies a place of unique interest in as much as it

is, as we have said, the fullest expression, to be found in his poetry, of his transcendentalism. The poet says now that the mind is not a mere automaton, but an original creative force; that Nature has no gift of her own to offer to man; that she has no life apart from man's; and that the colour, warmth, beauty, and life, which we usually attribute to her, are in reality derived from some inward energy of the soul. Now, this inward energy of the soul, which has the power of investing objects of the outer world with ineffable beauty, is Joy, he says,—such Joy as only the pure in heart experience in their purest moments and is

“Undreamt of by the sensual and the proud.”

This conclusion at which Coleridge arrives is not a mere argument; it is the outcome of an intense personal realisation. The poet is possessed with a feeling of dull pain. Nature, with her western sky, her clouds, her moon, and her stars, is around him; but she makes no impression upon his mind in that wan and heartless mood. He *sees* that all the objects of Nature, by which he is surrounded, are excellently fair; but he does not *feel* their beauty; and, therefore, he cannot get

any relief from them. Hence it dawns upon him  
that we must not hope

“from outward forms to win  
The passion and the life, whose fountains  
are within ;”

and that

“O Lady ! we receive but what we give,  
And in our life alone does Nature live :  
Ours is her wedding garment, ours her shroud !  
Ah ! from the soul itself must issue forth,  
A light, a glory, a fair luminous cloud  
    Enveloping the Earth—  
And from the soul itself must there be sent  
    A sweet and potent voice, of its own birth,  
Of all sweet sounds the life and element !”

We had better be clear in our minds about  
what we mean when we say that till the year 1799  
he was a Necessitarian and a Unitarian Christian.  
When we say that he was a Necessitarian we mean  
simply that he believed that the human mind was  
a mere automaton, and that our actions were not  
the effect of volition but of environment or of



inherited impulses and tendencies. When we say that he was a Unitarian Christian we mean that he believed in the Fatherhood of God, the Brotherhood of man, the Leadership of Jesus, the Victory of Good, the kingdom of God, and the Life Eternal. But, though a Christian, he did not believe in the doctrines of original sin and eternal punishment. On the other hand, he maintained that, since God was Love, no human being could be given over to eternal punishment; and thus Coleridge logically became an unqualified optimist.

There is one more aspect of this *Ode to Dejection*; but since it is a mystical aspect, it will not be out of place here to say a word or two about Coleridge's mysticism. The mystical elements in Coleridge's poetry are briefly these. He believed in a Spirit of the universe, with which it was possible for man to come into vital contact. He was convinced of the inadequacy of the intellect as an instrument for arriving at Truth, some kind of intuitional act being in his opinion absolutely necessary for the apprehension of Reality. He had a keen sense of oneness, of the fundamental unity that underlies the apparent diversity of life. He was intensely conscious of

the symbolical quality of all outer things, of "all that meets the bodily sense." And lastly, he had a burning desire to become one with the Divine. His mind "ached," as he says himself, "to behold and know something *great*, something *one* and *indivisible* behind this immense heap of little things, the universe." Now, mysticism depends upon *feeling*. In order to pierce through the outer covering of things and to realise the truth which they embody, it is necessary not only to *see* but also to *feel*. And when a mystic loses this power of feeling he experiences a state of depression and stagnation, a state not of active pain but of terrible inertia, weariness, and apathy, a state of dull misery, which, in the technical language of the mystics, is known as the "dark desert." And when the soul enters this 'dark desert,' it experiences a sense of awful loneliness or spiritual desertion. This *Ode to Dejection* is the greatest expression in English poetry of this peculiar mystical state. In it Coleridge deplures in pathetic strains his loss of mystical feeling. He gazes at the starry heavens and cries

"I see, not *feel*, how beautiful they are !"

Here is his own description of the dull pain with which he is possessed :

"A grief without a pang, void, dark, and drear,  
A stifled, drowsy, unimpassioned grief,  
Which finds no natural outlet, no relief,  
In word, or sigh, or tear."

Indeed, no English poet has ever given a better and more accurate description of this strange mystical state than has Coleridge in this remarkable ode. Elsewhere also he gives expression to it but the most poignant utterance, particularly of that spiritual loneliness which many mystics experience, is to be found in that unforgettable stanza in *The Ancient Mariner*—

"Alone, alone, all, all alone,  
Alone on a wide, wide sea !  
And never a soul took pity on  
My soul in agony."

To sum up: this great ode, viewed solely from the stand-point of its intellectual content, has four points of interest about it. It reveals an important cause of Coleridge's failure as a poet—namely, his native tendency to abstraction. It expresses a significant aspect of his conception of poetry—namely, that it is the outcome of hope and joy, and that distress and despair are inimical to it.

It is the most complete expression, to be found in Coleridge's poetry, of his Transcendentalism, asserting, as it does, that the fountains of passion, of joy, of beauty, and of life are *within* the soul of man and not *without* in the outer show of things. And, lastly, it gives the most complete description in English poetry of what the mystics call the "dreary desert" or "the dark night of the soul."

#### 7. Shelley's *To a Skylark*.

*To a Skylark* was written at Casa Ricci near Leghorn in the spring of 1820 and was published with *Prometheus Unbound* in the same year. Mrs. Shelley says: "In the Spring we spent a week or two near Leghorn.....It was on a beautiful summer evening, while wandering among the lanes whose myrtle-hedges were the bowers of the fire-flies, that we heard the carolling of the skylark which inspired one of the most beautiful of his poems," which inspired the ode *To a Skylark*, that spirit-winged song known to all lovers of English poetry—a song vibrating still with such a keen and pure intensity. The unsatisfied imagination of Shelley has here discovered an external object which seemed exactly to typify the nature of its own emotion, and has

grouped round it a multitude of images with an absolute perfection of art. While recording the thoughts which the lark's song awakens, Shelley reproduces in words the melody itself, clothing it in a stanza which corresponds, in its first four lines, to the Crescendo of the bird's song, and in the prolonged last line to the 'rain of melody' which is its climax. The verse quivers with emotion and the rapture of the bird is caught for ever in imperishable language. This poem is perhaps Shelley's supreme achievement as a lyric poet. It is, besides, the most popular of his lyrics, and is one of the greatest odes in English literature. The spontaneity, the splendid abandonment, the musical rush of the lines, the delicacy, the ecstasy, the light and the colour, which are exhibited in this exquisite ode, make us willing captives of the poet. Alfred Noyes, himself a notable poet, calls it "the happiest poem in literature". Beneath its rapturous exultation, however, there runs an undercurrent of melancholy reflection. The song of the skylark is better than all measures of delightful sound, but it brings home to the mind of the poet, only the more keenly by its contrast, the sad irony of human lot. While the skylark is the disembodied spirit of joy, flooding earth and heaven with his melody, we men—

We look before and after,  
And pine for what is not ;  
Our sincerest laughter  
With some pain is fraught ;  
Our sweetest songs are those that tell of  
saddest thought.

The ode *To a Skylark* is full of iridescent loveliness ; and no praise would be excessive for the ecstasy of feeling, the lightness and grace, the felicity of phrase, the verbal magic, the delicate sensibility, and the imaginative idealism which impart to it a rare distinction and an elusive charm which is difficult to define. It is, in the words of Swinburne, "the most perfect poem of its kind in all the world of poetry."

The full-throated song of the nightingale was for Keats a manifestation of perfect beauty which filled him with pangs of the unattainable. Shelley seeks to capture the skylark's secret of 'harmonious madness', so that he may use it in his own poetry to redeem the world. There are some critics who find fault with the succession of splendid similes in the poem, saying that they distract the reader's mind from the main theme. Such an objection is out of place in a lyric. A lyric is not a syllogism

but a song. These similes are not only beautiful in themselves, they also serve to reveal some new aspect of the lark's hidden music. The poem is written in quintains or stanzas of five verses. Every line, except the last, is a trochaic trimeter with the last foot frequently truncated. In simpler words, leaving the concluding line of each stanza, every verse consists of three feet; each foot consists of two syllables and the accent falls on the first syllable; while the last foot, being *truncated*, as we say in the technical language of prosody, frequently consists of only one syllable instead of two. The first line in each stanza is an Alexandrine with an occasional feminine ending or an extra unaccented syllable. The rhythm of the poem is thus made to suggest the flight of the skylark, the three-barred trochaic lines conveying the notion of a short dipping flight, which culminates, in the long last line of each stanza, in a strong wheeling motion.

The rhyming scheme is quite simple. The first line rhymes with the third, and the second with the fourth and fifth, making thus the last two lines a couplet. Double rhymes are freely employed: *wingest, singest; lightning, brightening; arrows, narrows; embowered, deflowered;*

*showers, flowers; fountains, mountains; and so on.* It should be noted by the student that almost all the double rhymes in the poems are made of single words, which is regarded as a great merit in versification. There is, however, a good deal of loose rhyming in the poem. 'Heart,' for example, is made to rhyme with 'wert;' 'there' with 'clear;' 'thieves' with 'gives;' 'surpass' with 'was.' Tennyson was much more accurate in such matters than Shelley; and modern criticism is distinctly severe on all loose rhyming. But we should remember that rhymes which are now regarded as faulty may have been quite appropriate in Shelley's time, pronunciation having changed since; and that rhymes which have once been accepted tend to become traditional in poets even after they are commonly thought to be inaccurate. The rhymes are, of course, very loosely employed throughout the poem, but, in fairness to Shelley, it must be acknowledged that his instinct for rhythm is so unerring that his poetry can almost dispense with the ornament and the binding and buttressing processes of rhyme. "He was," in the words of Symonds, "the loftiest and the most spontaneous singer of our language." Shelley's poetry is remarkable for the perfection of his music. He does not care for any devised technique



or the colder perfections of academic art; his cadences are always spontaneous. He is not a laborious weaver of metres, but a poet with a genius for extemporising pulsating rhythms. Like his own skylark, he pours forth his full heart in profuse strains of unpremeditated art.

Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind*.

The *Ode to the West Wind* is one of the finest lyrical poems in the English language. It is instinct with true poetic imagination and a fervour of utterance which holds the reader spell-bound with its sincerity, its spontaneity, its burning zeal, its elemental force, its personal despondency, and its prophetic passion. It is, indeed, the greatest of all the nature-lyrics which Shelley ever wrote and it is doubtful whether any other English poet has written a more perfect poem. It is, in the words of Symonds, "the most symmetrically perfect as well as the most impassioned" of his shorter lyrics; and the union which it achieves between the poet's spirit and the forces of Nature, between the spirit of the West Wind and Shelley's own, is not a mere simile but an interfusion of the two which strikes us by its perfect naturalness. The poem is not "a mere

swarm of fancies swept along in a stream of entrancing music," but an ardent expression of the poet's intense cognition of an abiding reality in Nature, which fills us with a new sense of her life and significance. It is the trumpet of a prophecy, proclaiming to the dull dark world Shelley's optimistic faith in the ultimate destiny of mankind—that, if winter comes, spring cannot be very far behind. The difficult metre, *terza rima*, in which the poem is written, is managed with complete mastery. No one has ever made the ordinary heroic line move with such breathless impetuosity as Shelley. The lines rush on through a complicated system of rhymes and express the irresistible might of the wind ; and the music of each period is varied like the sudden changes of instruments in an orchestra.

In the first stanza the West Wind is conceived as both destroyer and preserver. It is the breath of Autumn's being ; and from its invisible but dreadful presence the multi-coloured dead leaves flee like ghosts before an enchanter. But it also carries in its flight the seeds to their cold gloomy beds where they lie until its sister the Vernal Wind blows over the warm earth, brings them to life again, and fills every plain and hill with bright-

coloured and sweet-scented buds. The West Wind is imagined as wild, invisible, moving everywhere, and as destroyer and preserver. The stanza contains three original and startling but appropriate similes. The pestilence-stricken dead leaves of autumn are likened to ghosts ; and the Wild West Wind to a dreadful wizard. The leaves flee before the wind, just as ghosts run before a mighty magician. The seeds are compared to corpses ; and their dark wintry beds to graves. The seeds lie in their cold, low, and dark beds, just as corpses do in their tombs. The vernal wind is compared to a shepherdess, and the buds to flocks. Just as a shepherdess drives her flocks out of their fold for feeding them in the open, so the vernal wind makes the seeds enclosed in their beds come out as buds and bloom in the air. The south wind of the spring is called the "azure sister" of the West Wind—a lovely expression, used to denote those bright warm days and blue skies which the vernal wind brings with it—an expression which reminds us of the well-known old Hebrew words, "When the earth is still by reason of the South Wind."

In the second stanza the idea of the Wind as destroyer is continued. It is compared to some all-powerful Cosmic Stream sweeping with dire

commotion through the precipitous sky and shaking with its might the interwoven branches of heaven and ocean, so that their decaying leaves, the clouds, are loosened ; and they send forth their electric flashes of lightning and pour their water on the blue and billowy bosom of the West Wind. The spreading, winding, ever-changing clouds are like the hair of some Maenad floating on the wind. The Maenads, also called Bacchantes, were in Greek mythology the female votaries of Bacchus, the god of wine. The word means 'the frenzied women', and they got this name, because in the celebration of their Bacchanalian festivals their gestures, actions, and wild dances were like those of mad women. Notice the awful picture. The West Wind is compared by implication to a fierce Maenad dancing frantically ; and the clouds which are spread on its surface from the indistinct line of horizon to the heaven's height are compared to her bright hair. This awful image of the West Wind reminds us of Mother Kali's dance of destruction. The wind is further likened to a funeral song sung over the dead year. The night is the immense sepulchre erected for the dead year, and the over-hanging firmament which is a mighty congregation of vapours is the arching roof of that sepulchre.

In the third stanza also the conception of the Wind as a destructive agent is preserved. It passes over the Mediterranean and destroys the images on its surface. It passes over the Atlantic and the vegetation in its bed trembles with fear. The picture of the blue Mediterranean lying in the soothing sinuous embrace of his crystal streams is exquisite and reminds us of the blue-complexioned Krishna lying in the midst of his fair-complexioned *gopies* clinging round him. In this stanza the Wind passes from the earth and the sky to the sea. It rouses the sleeping Mediterranean with its terror, cleaves the Atlantic into chasms for its pathway, and makes the plants in the ocean's bed grow pale with fear. In a note Shelley says: "The phenomenon alluded to at the conclusion of the third stanza is well known to naturalists. The vegetation at the bottom of the sea, of rivers, and of lakes, sympathises with that of the land in the change of seasons, and is consequently influenced by the winds which announce it." Observe in this stanza the delicate picture of the old moss-grown and flower-covered palaces and towers reflected in the quivering waters of the Mediterranean.

In the fourth stanza the theme is carried over

from nature, from the earth, the sky, and the sea to the poet's own life by means of the figures of leaf, cloud, and wave already used. But the thought of the wind as destroyer is dropped and as preserver of the seeds of life and truth taken up. The poet wishes that he were a dead leaf so that the wind might carry it. He wishes he were a swift cloud so that he might fly with it. He wishes he were a wave of the sea so that he might share the impulse of its strength. He even wishes he were as he was in his boyhood, a creature of impetuous breath, a swift and pardlike spirit, who would have dared to vie with the wind and outrun it in its rushing speed through the sky. And if he were even what he had been in his boyhood he would never have prayed to the wind as he is doing now out of an agony of distress ; for he would then have followed the wind as an equal comrade in its wanderings over heaven, or even left it behind in its tumultuous race through the sky. But, alas, he says, he is neither a dead leaf nor a swift cloud, neither a panting wave nor even what he was in earlier years, one too like the wind, tameless and swift and proud. The world has fettered him. Misery has bowed him. And life has broken him on its wheel. Brutal persecution and the sadness of his heart have driven him

upon the thorns of life and he is bleeding. And, therefore, he prays to the wind to lift him up as a leaf or a wave or a cloud, so that he too may share the impulse of its strength and be free, though less free than the wind itself. This stanza is remarkable for its combination of pathos and power.

In the closing stanza the theme widens to include all humanity. There is also a reversion to the original image of the wind in the forest, but as a preserver and not as a destroyer. And a new but kindred image, that of the play of the wind upon a dying fire, is introduced. The poet prays to the Wind for inspiration. "Blow through me," he says, "as thou blowest through the forest. Make me thy lyre. I know that my leaves are falling like those of the forest in autumn, but what does it matter? The tumult of thy mighty harmonies will make me vocal as well as it does the forest. Oh thou Wild Spirit, Oh thou Uncontrollable, become one with my spirit. Be thou me, impetuous one. Drive my dead thoughts over the world even as you drive the autumn leaves to quicken a new birth. Scatter my words among mankind even as you scatter ashes and sparks from a dying fire. And blow through my lips the trumpet of a prophecy.

proclaiming to the sleeping earth that if winter comes, spring cannot be far behind." The wind has passed through the forests of the earth, through the clouds of the sky, through the waves and the depths of the sea, through the leaves and the clouds and the waves of Shelley's own heart; and then, at the climax of emotion, it sweeps through all mankind, bearing with it dead things and the seeds of a New Day. Out of the personal Shelley passes into the universal, out of the concrete into the abstract, out of the familiar into the remote, out of the real into the ideal; from the winter of the earth he passes to the winter of humanity, from the rebirth of the seed to the resurrection of the Soul, from the forest of nature to the forest of humanity, from the image of destruction to that of regeneration, from the image of winter to that of eternal spring. The last stanza is important, since it indicates Shelley's conception of poetry. Poetry is not mere art. It is an incantation. It is a prophecy. It pours life into dead things. It is a trumpet that awakens the sleeping world. It evokes faith in the despondent, shakes the lazy world, puts it on its mettle, and sets it coursing towards a brighter day, a nobler destiny, towards the spring behind



winter, towards 'something afar from the sphere of our sorrow.' The poet is not a mere artist. He is a divine harp through which the Cosmic Power makes music for mankind. His thoughts must quicken new ideas. His words should be like sparks to enkindle generous enthusiasms. He should be a reformer as well as a prophet of a Golden Age. And Shelley realised this ideal in his own person and poetry. He was not a mere artist and apostle of beauty like Keats, nor a mere iconoclast like Byron. He was reformer and prophet as well as poet. As a poet he was the greatest lyrical singer that England ever produced. As a reformer his voice was the voice of a coming dawn. And he was a prophet of faith and hope in a world which had lost both. He hated slavery of every sort with a fiery hatred and freedom and universal charity he loved with a flaming love. As Oxford, his *Alma mater*, has changed its attitude towards him from that of persecution to one of reverence, so the world has embraced most of his principles for the regeneration of mankind; and from his obscure grave in the Protestant cemetery at Rome his voice is heard around the world.

The *Ode to the West Wind* was written, as

Shelley himself tells us in a note, in October in a wood on the banks of the Arno near Florence when a tempestuous wind was sweeping the Cisalpine region and gathering the clouds for a terrific storm, and thunder and lightning, hail and rain. It is the most impressive of Shelley's poems. The verse sweeps along with the elemental rush of the wind it celebrates. Metaphor succeeds to metaphor, and simile to simile, with wild rapidity. It illustrates Shelley's preference for what is fleeting and evanescent in Nature, for the flux, the change, the eternal motion of things, and for the wild forces of Nature. Beneath its kinetic energy it conceals an art of the highest kind; and its magnificent structure is not a mere superimposition but the inevitable outcome of the growth of the poet's thought. Shelley invokes the Wild Wind, because this elemental force of Nature is in tune with his own soul. He fuses himself and nature both together into one imagination. And the two elements of his personality, his prophetic fervour and personal passion, are combined in perfect harmony in the *Ode to the West Wind*. Prof. Stopford Brooke writes of it in a strain of enthusiastic admiration. He says: "This is the lyric of lyrics. It is the hymn of our own world. It ought to be set to music by a great

musician, but he should have the genius of Beethoven. There is no song in the whole of our literature more passionate, more penetrative, more full of the force by which the idea and its form are united into one creation."

The prosodic technique of this ode merits consideration. It consists of five stanzas which contain fourteen lines each. And every quatorzain is divided into four triplets and a couplet, and almost invariably run together. Thus the poem is really a kind of sonnet sequence, though the triplets are written in *terza rima*. The predominance of dentals, gutturals, rolling *r*'s, and bursting labials contribute tremendously to the sweeping force and movement of the verse; and the avoidance of a full stop in most of the stanzas and the frequency of enjambment or run-on lines combine to give this ode an onrush, an impetuosity, and a breathless velocity which is quite in conformity with the commotion, the uncontrol, and the skyey speed of the Wind it celebrates.

#### 8. Keats's *Ode to a Nightingale*.

The regular ode reached its culmination in the hands of John Keats who wrote about a dozen of

poems in this form, such as *To Hope*, *Ode to a Nightingale*, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, *Ode on Melancholy*, *Ode on Indolence*, *Ode to Psyche*, *Ode to Autumn*, *Bards of Passion and of Mirth*, *Ode to Fanny*, and *Ode to Appolo*. To these may be added the fragmentary *Ode to Maia* and the *Ode to Sorrow* or *The Indian Maid's Lament* in the Fourth Book of *Endymion*. The odes of Keats combine in them the peculiar excellences of the form with absolute freedom from its characteristic drawbacks, such as stiffness of phraseology, over-elaboration of form, artificiality, rhetorical declamation, which disfigure the odes of Dryden, Gray, Collins, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and even Shelley. They are, as they should be, always in the form of an address or invocation. They are sufficiently long to distinguish them from the lyric proper. Their language is singularly exalted in style and dignified in tone. The evolution of thought in them is always measured, distinct, and logical. Their structure is invariably sufficiently elaborate, neither too sustained to fracture their unity, nor too slender to indicate their difference from the song proper. They are distinguished by their poignancy of feeling, their richly meditative texture, their solemn splendour of imagery, and their flawless workmanship. They are remarkable

for their Hellenic clarity, their chiselled beauty, and their inevitable poetic afflatus. They surprise us with their brooding sweetness, their long-drawn-out melody, their fine excess, and their glorious independence. No wonder, therefore, that Prof. E. De Selincourt goes in raptures over them and says that "in the odes he (Keats) has no master; and their indefinable beauty is so direct and so distinctive an effluence of his soul that he can have no disciple."

All the odes which Keats has written are *modern*, one or two irregular and intricate, but the rest and the best of them regular and comparatively simple. He has attempted no classical variety of the ode, Pindaric or Horatian. His range as an odist is confined to the modern romantic ode, with preference for the stanzaic form, of which he is the greatest master. His odes are not choric but purely personal and subjective. They are the most characteristic, richest, and the most harmonious expression of the full current of his soul, his keen sense of the beauty of Nature and the significance of Art and Mythology, his impassioned recognition of the fundamental mystery of Beauty, fleeting yet permanent, his love of romance, his all-embracing sensuousness, his profound sense of the mutability

of life, and his almost Shakesperean receptivity and openness of mind.

The great odes of Keats are six in number ; *Ode to a Nightingale*, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, *Ode to Psyche*, *To Autumn*, *Ode on Melancholy*, and *Ode on Indolence*. They were all written between the spring of 1819 and the autumn of that year, when the poet was only twenty-four years of age. This was the period of his best work, and these odes are unequalled in English Literature. Swinburne estimates the group thus ; "of these perhaps the two nearest to absolute perfection, to the triumphant achievement and accomplishment of the very utmost beauty possible to human words, may be that *To Autumn* and that *On a Grecian Urn* ; the most radiant, fervent, and musical is that *To a Nightingale* ; the most pictorial, and perhaps the tenderest in its ardour of passionate fancy, is that *To Psyche* ; the subtlest in sweetness of thought and feeling is that *On Melancholy*. Greater lyrical poetry the world may have seen than any that is in these ; lovelier it surely has never seen, nor ever can it possibly see."

The *Ode to a Nightingale* was composed early in May, 1819, when the poet was living with

Charles Brown at Wentworth Place, Hampstead, and first published in the following July in the *Annals of the Fine Arts*, a quarterly magazine edited by James Elmes. It was written under the inspiration of hearing a nightingale on Hampstead Heath. The bird's song, it is said, "often threw Keats into a sort of trance of tranquil pleasure." It is the most beautiful of his odes. Robert Bridges says of it: "I could not name an English poem of the same length which contains so much beauty as this ode." It is the most deeply charged with human feeling. Keats was at the time of its composition in a fit of dejection on account of the death of his brother Tom, the knowledge of his own fatal illness with consumption, the family disease, of which he himself died two years later, his hopeless passion for Fanny Brawne, and the brutal criticism of the Reviewers. He is tortured by the mystery of human suffering and decay in a world

"Where but to think is to be full of sorrow  
And leaden-eyed despairs."

The poem is a magnificent revelation of Keats's deepest aspiration, which was to escape 'the weariness, the fever, and the fret' of this world where

every thing, even Youth, Beauty, and Love, is morsel for the mouth of Death, and to find refuge in the solace of pure Beauty, beauty that abides. The song of the bird is for him a symbol of the beauty for which there is no death nor change. Captivated by its subtle charm and mounted on the invisible wings of his own poetic imagination he is transported to the world of nature and romance where bliss for ever reigns, leaving this world of woe far behind. But this is only for a time. Anon he lapses back into his own wretched self and hears life groaning round him again and asks in utter perplexity—

“Was it a vision, or a waking dream?

Fled is that music :—Do I wake or sleep?”

The joy and the immortality of Nature are contrasted with the misery and mortality of man ; and the idea which is enforced is that however much we may try we can never escape this dark and woeful world and that even Imagination is but a ‘deceiving elf’ at best, incapable of making us forget for long the weariness, the fever, and the fret of life.

The poem is remarkable for its uniform level of exaltation, its organic unity, its vivid pictures,



its rapturous music, its verbal magic, and its concentrated epithets such as 'sun-burnt mirth,' 'beaded bubbles winking at the brim,' and 'alien corn.' The essence of all romance is concentrated in the epithets used in the oft-quoted lines--

"Charmed magic casements, opening on the foam  
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn."

They are that poetry which is incantation ; they have enchantment but no meaning ; and their suggestive appeal is unlimited. "This ode," remarks Prof. Elton, and justly, "is the greatest, as a concerted composition, that Keats made, and is also the richest in variety of passionate expression." It has often been noted as a singular feature of the poem that it contrasts the transitory lot of the individual man with the permanent life of the nightingale, conceived not as an individual but as type of the race. This has been pronounced a fallacy ; and in the strictly logical sense a fallacy of course it is. But it is a perfectly true as well as striking expression of the poet's mood and feeling. And the greatness of poetry must be judged not with reference to its truth to the logic of thought but to the logic of emotion. John Middleton Murry, who has written one of the finest books of

criticism on Keats entitled *Keats and Shakespeare*, admires the miraculous sweep of the imagination by which the nightingale is suddenly endowed with immortality. He writes: "Shakespeare himself never made a more perfect or more dazzling flight of the imagination. The nightingale is mortal as any son of man. So speaks the rational mind; but the poetic mind is of another order: it can move sovereign through the dimensions, it can impose eternity on the temporal, it reveals miracles by performing them." In no poem is the ecstatic self-abandon of the poet more in evidence than in this ode. The stanza-form in which it is written is in itself a beautiful invention. It consists of ten lines, which are iambic pentameters except the shortened eighth line which is a trimeter, skilfully introduced to redeem the rather long stanza of five-foot lines from monotony and also to throw into stronger relief the inevitable beauty of the last two lines in each verse. Its intricate rhyme-plan which ever repeats and yet ever varies its chimes so as to keep the ear ever expectant is *ababcedede*.

Let us analyse and interpret the poem stanza by stanza. In the opening stanza the poet expresses the effect of the nightingale's song upon him.

It is like that of an opiate which dulls sensation, physical and mental, and induces a kind of lethargy. The gradualness of this effect is indicated with extraordinary precision. It begins in a continued pain of the heart, overtakes the senses, and then affects the mind which begins, in consequence, to sink towards forgetfulness. Keats was remarkably sensitive to all sweet sights and sounds; so much so, indeed, that he would at times tremble and even weep for sheer joy. And when he tells us that "in the very temple of delight

Veiled Melancholy has her sovran shrine,"

we know that he is speaking from personal experience. No English poet ever studied more closely the nature of Sensation than did Keats. He is the supreme poet of Sensation. And no other poet could have written the first stanza of this ode, which describes the ecstasy of musical delight or the pleasure that turns into pain by reason of its very intensity. The nightingale is for him not a bird but a beautiful sylvan nymph who, sitting in the midst of a green, thick, and dark grove of trees, is singing with complete abandon and for the sheer joy of it. And her song is the song of summer, the warmest and

brightest season of the year. And though she is singing at the loftiest pitch there is yet no trace of effort in her song. It is characterised, on the contrary, by consummate ease, naturalness, and spontaneity. And so magical is the effect of it that the very plot of ground where she is singing, catches the divine infection and becomes melodious. When even the dead sod becomes vocal with her song, its effect on the sensitive heart of a poet like Keats may better be imagined than described. He is overcome by joy which is almost pain. He feels a kind of sleepy weight pressing on him and his heart is aching not on account of jealousy, as he says, of the happy lot of the nightingale, singing in her sylvan shades, but on account of the very excess of his happiness aroused by her song. The stanza bears eloquent witness not only to Keats's extraordinary sensitiveness but also to his profound sympathy with the life of nature, which enables him to enter into her very inmost being. He has such capacity to give himself up to the life of the moment that the moment becomes eternity, so that the music of the nightingale passes into his own soul and comes out in tones which defy the challenge of death.

In the second stanza the poet longs for a

draught of wine, such wine as has been cooled for long in the deep-dug earth, such wine as makes him think of the goddess of flowers and rural verdure, of the dances of country youth, of the songs of Provence, and of the bright innocent merriment of peasant boys and girls. He longs for a cup full of such wine, of wine which is unadulterated, which is red like the Muse's spring, Hippocrene, whose taste makes men immortal, wine which bursts into pretty sparkling bubbles in a row at the brim of the beaker and dyes its mouth purple with its bright colour. And he yearns for such wine so that he may leave the world with all its worries and become a comrade of the nightingale in her dim forest. This stanza is one of the finest Bacchanalian passages in English poetry. It shows Keats's love of vivid colouring and strongly marked contrasts, his rich classical associations, his predilection for the Middle Ages, his discontent with the actual world, and his love of natural life as it is led in the forest.

In the third stanza the poet dwells upon the nature of the actual world. It is full of weariness, fever and fret. The groans of men who are dying are audible every hour. Nothing is permanent. Venerable Age, strong Youth, lustrous Beauty, and

ardent Love—everything is short-lived. So wretched is this life, indeed, that it is impossible even to think of it without pain and despair. The line—

“Where youth grows pale and spectre-thin  
and dies”—

has reference to the death of his brother Tom by consumption. This stanza is one of the most pathetic passages in English poetry. Its sadness is equalled only by its beauty.

In the fourth stanza he rejects the need of wine, for, after all, its effect, he realises, is but temporary. He will fly to the nightingale not on the chariot, drawn by leopards, of Bacchus, the god of wine, but mounted on the invisible wings of poetic imagination, which brushes aside all the impediments and embarrassments created by the dull slow-moving brain, and reaches its destination in less than a twinkling of the eye. He fancies himself already with the light-winged Dryad of the trees. The night is lovely. The moon is enthroned in the sky like a fairy queen. And the stars are flocking like so many fairies around their Queen-Moon. But below, under the trees, there is no light except what comes through the branches.

when the wind blows the leaves apart, as it passes through the leafy darkness and the moss-grown meandering paths of the garden. Keats was no epicure. He discards wine in favour of poetic imagination. People who believe that noble poetry can be written only in the intoxication of wine or some other stimulant are sadly mistaken. Poetry is the breath of the Cosmic Soul blowing through the individual soul. But this breath of God cannot blow through our heart unless we have made it clean of all rubbish and purified it with noble words, noble thoughts, and noble deeds. Keats, like a true Romantic poet, speaks of the dull brain which retards the flight of imagination ; and thus he voices his revolt from the purely intellectual view of man's nature. Poetry is not the outcome of the cold calculating brain but of warm emotion and lofty imagination ; and so long as emotion and imagination are suppressed genuine poetry is impossible.

In the fifth stanza he says that though by reason of the gloom he cannot see what flowers are blooming around him and what soft and fragrant blossoms are hanging on the branches, yet he can guess them all—the white hawthorn, the eglantine, famous in old pastoral poetry,

violets which are already dying because the spring is passing away, and which are hidden now under the leaves, and the musk-rose the first-born flower of the middle of May, full of intoxicating perfume which makes fragrant even the dew upon it and invites the wanton flies that flock around it with their musical humming in summer evenings. This stanza bears eloquent witness to Keats's love of Nature for her own sake, and to his delicate sense of smell which can distinguish the flowers without even looking at them.

In the sixth stanza the poet says that it would be sweet to die under such conditions. He is listening in the dark to the entrancing music of the nightingale. The night is lovely. The flowers are blooming around. The moon is shining overhead and the stars are sparkling. He has frequently wished for death. He has called her by many affectionate names in order to induce her to come and take him quietly away from this miserable world. But it has never been nor will ever be so rich to die as now, when the nightingale is pouring forth its soul in such joy and when his own soul is in such perfect harmony with it. And if he were to die now how strange it would be. The nightingale



would still keep on singing, but he would not be able to hear her ; for he would be as insensible to the sweetness of her music as the dead sod under his feet.

The thought of his own death suggests, by way of contrast, the immortality of the nightingale or rather the deathless character of her song, the same song which was heard in ancient days by high and low alike and which he is hearing now ; the same song which touched the sad heart of Ruth with delight when she stood weeping and gleaning corn in the alien fields of Boaz ; the same song which has often

“Charmed magic casements, opening on the foam  
Of perilous seas in faery lands forlorn.”

The individual dies but the song goes on forever and forever. The song that Keats heard a hundred years ago is still heard in Hampstead Heath. This stanza is unsurpassed by anything in English poetry in its beauty and its magic power. All lovers of poetry agree that the last lines contain the very quintessence of romanticism. “We read the words,” says Mr. Downer, “and seem to behold, in high romance, the shadowy

enchanter's castle in a kingdom by the sea, the lonely tower of which encloses an imprisoned princess, held in duress ; and when the rich full note of the nightingale breaks upon the captive ear, she throws open her window to listen and to look out over the wild waves for the ship that shall bring the knight of her deliverance."

In the last stanza the flight of imagination is over. The song dies away. And the poet is called back to his own solitary and unhappy self in the miserable world of sordid reality. The word 'forlorn' breaks the spell, calls the poet back from the far-off days of Ruth, the magic casements, the fairy lands, to his own unhappy state. Imagination cheated him for a while and he was away with the nightingale through the Middle Ages of mystery and romance, through the classic times of beauty, and through the Biblical times of hallowed pathos, but the spell is over, and fled is that music. "No more for him the sweet beguilement."

"Ever let the fancy roam,  
Pleasure never is at home,"

says Keats, but the conclusion at which he arrives

in this splendid ode is that even fancy cannot cheat us so well as she is famed to do. The misery of life is too insistent even for poetic imagination and cannot be quietened for long.

9. Keats's *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*.

*La Belle Dame sans Merci* (the beautiful lady without mercy) is a ballad ; and before we offer any critical observations it is worth while stating in brief what a ballad is and what are its prominent characteristics.

The Ballad in literature is a species of poetical composition, in which the matter is epic or narrative, and the form is so far lyrical as to render it suitable for being chanted or sung, with or without musical accompaniment. It is 'a simple, spirited, narrative poem in short stanzas of two or four lines (without counting the burden or refrain), in which a story is told in straight-forward verse, often with great elaborateness and detail in incident, but always with graphic simplicity and force.' It is marked by clear and vivid conception, truth, simplicity, and directness of expression, the profoundest pathos, and the charm of an art that knows not art. Of all narrative

and lyrical forms it is the simplest and most direct in its effect. It deals with the elemental human emotions, and its success as a literary form depends upon the vividness and potency with which these are sympathetically revived within the imagination of the hearer or the reader. It flourishes obviously in a simple unlettered age; and in an age of elaborate refinement and complexity in the conditions of social and intellectual life it is difficult, though not impossible, for an artist to recapture the spontaneity and genuineness of the antique, the true simplicity born of the absence of self-consciousness. We can no more recover the naivete of the early singers than the grown man can recover the simplicity of the child. Nevertheless, splendid examples of success in this difficult though apparently simple art may be found in Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Keats' *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, Tennyson's *Revenge*, Browning's *Herve Riel*, and Rossetti's *King's Tragedy*, which preserve the best traditions of the ancient ballad.

*La Belle Dame sans Merci*, then, is a ballad, an exquisite ballad, recapturing, as it does, the simplicity, the spontaneity, the directness, the vividness, the artless naivete, and the graphic force

of the ancient models. It is a romantic ballad in as much as it deals with the theme of love and also because it depends for its inspiration upon the medieval world of knights and ladies, and of weird enchantment. From its extraordinarily brief compass the whole story of the Knight's love, his despair and his anguish, is flashed with a dismal sheen on the reader's imagination. Not only that: pale Kings and Princes too, pale, death-pale warriors, with their starved lips and their unutterable woe, rise before the reader's mind and fill his heart with infinite pathos. It sets before us, with imagery drawn from the medieval world of enchantment and knight-errantry, a type of the wasting power of love. "The plight which the poet thus shadows forth," says Sir Sidney Colvin, "is partly that of his own soul in thralldom. Every reader must feel how truly the imagery expresses the passion: how powerfully, through these fascinating old-world symbols, the universal heart of man is made to speak. To many students (of whom the present writer is one) the union of infinite tenderness with a weird intensity, the conciseness and purity of the poetic form, the wild yet simple magic of the cadences, the perfect inevitable union of sound and sense, make of *La Belle Dame sans Merci* the master-piece, not

only among the shorter poems of Keats, but even among them all." This simple ballad has also another point of importance about it: it shows Keats's curious power of entering into the thought and sentiment of other times. Concerning this aspect of the poem, Prof. Saintsbury writes: "He could have known extremely little of medieval literature; yet there is nothing anywhere..... which catches up the whole of the true medieval romantic spirit.....as does the short piece of *La Belle Dame sans Merci*."

The title of this ballad is taken from that of a poem by Alain Chartier, the secretary and court poet of Charles VI and Charles VII of France. This title had caught Keats's fancy, and in the *Eve of St. Angas* he makes Porphyro waken Madeline by playing beside her bed—

"an ancient ditty, long since mute,  
In Provence called *La Belle Dame sans Merci*."

The syllables continuing to haunt him, he wrote a poem of his own on the theme in the spring of 1819.

The ballad is written in quatrains or stanzas

of four lines. The first three verses in every stanza are iambic tetrameters; that is to say, they consist of four feet each, every foot comprising two syllables and the accent falling upon the second syllable. The last line of every quatrain is an iambic dimeter, with an occasional extra syllable at the beginning, as in the line—

“And the harvest’s done;”

or again,

“On the cold hillside.”

And there is a single rhyme employed in each stanza, so that the second line rhymes with the fourth, and the first and second lines are left unrhymed.

*La Belle Dame Sans Merci* is a ballad of art, since it seeks to reproduce the form and atmosphere of its primitive prototype, notably the supernatural ballad. But while it recaptures with astonishing success the first fine careless rapture of the ancient ballad, it has a glamour of mood and a delicacy of workmanship which are never met with in the antique models. It shows a rhythmic subtlety

which the old balladists could never have devised, such, for example, as the four impressive monosyllabic beats of the lines

“And no birds sing.”

“I love thee true.”

“Thee hath in thrall;”

the falling cadence of

“Fast withereth too” ;

and the incidence of the stresses upon the piercing vowel-notes in

“And her eyes were wild.”

The only possible blemish in the ballad is that towards the close of the poem the *i* sound becomes a trifle too obtrusive upon the ear.

This ballad occupies a place of unique interest in the poetry of Keats. The work of Keats is remarkable for its wealth of ornament, its gorgeous effects of vivid colouring, and its picturesque



diction. As a rule, he uses an extremely rich and tessellated expression. Many critics, in consequence, commit the mistake of imagining that he was incapable of that simplicity of style which we find, for example, in Wordsworth and in many another poet. This erroneous notion on the part of many a reader of Keats is dispelled the moment he reads this famous ballad; for alone among his poems it is disciplined throughout to a fine rigour of epithet, and is admirable for its avoidance of all detailed ornament which would have been extremely out of keeping with the simple ballad style. Even the strong sensuous vein of his mind is kept under control, though there are obvious opportunities to give it free play. Keats writes—

“She took me to her elfin grot,  
And there she wept and sighed full sore,  
And there I shut her wild wild eyes  
With kisses four.”

In sending this poem to his brother George in the Journal Letter, under date, April 28, 1819, Keats says:—“Why four kisses, you will say, why four? Because I wish to restrain the headlong impetuosity of my Muse—she would fain have

said "score" without hurting the rhyme—but we must temper the imagination, as the critics say, with judgment." There is thus throughout this poem a remarkable self-restraint, an abstemiousness which is surpassing in Keats, and which manifests itself not only in its expression but also in its thought. His imagination here does not run riot, as it always does elsewhere; it is tempered with judgment. His art reaches its climax in this ballad; and it naturally found a great following. But the experiments of Rossetti and his friends in the style of the "literary ballad" sound forced and cramped beside it; and, though the influence of Coleridge is obvious, it is further removed from the folk-ballad than *The Ancient Mariner*; the conventions, the diction, and the burden are left far behind, though the use of the *écho*, 'on the cold hill-side' is retained, since it is essential to the effect. It is one of the most imaginative of supernatural literary ballads in English poetry. It is one of the finest specimens of the romanticism of weird suggestion, of which Coleridge is the greatest master in England.

*La Belle Dame Sans Merci* is one of the finest examples of what Campbell calls, "The circular lyric," which, in the hands of a master,

"is perhaps, artistically, the most perfect form" of lyrical poetry. Shelley uses it but seldom ; but Keats uses it with magnificent success as here in this ballad, enriching while it is worked into a ring all set with jewels. The stricken knight-at-arms is seen pale and loitering at the beginning of the poem, pale and loitering also at the end, but in completing this circle the reader's imagination becomes more and more impressed with the knight's doom and despair, and the withered sedge and birdless woods strike with so much more desolation at the close. Keats, who was a more thorough artist than Shelley, rounds off his poems, or at least comes gently down to earth again from his great imaginative altitudes. The close of his *Ode to a Nightingale* is an instance in point :

"Was it a vision or a waking dream ?

Fled is that music :—Do I wake or sleep ?"

Shelley could never have achieved this: his restless soaring spirit nearly always lifts the conclusion of his poem into a higher and ever higher plane. Like his own skylark, he singing still doth soar and soaring ever singeth.



of old-world symbols, the anguish and devastation of the poet's own soul.

We shall conclude our remarks on this famous ballad with a brief passage from Lafcadio Hearn who, speaking in praise of this poem, Writes :

"The theme, the phantom woman whose love is death, is almost as old as the world ; thousands of poems have been produced upon it. But in simple weird beauty I do not know of anything in all English literature exactly like this."

10. Arnold's *The Scholar Gipsy*.

*The Scholar Gipsy* was first published in 1853. The subject was suggested by a passage in Glanvil's *Vanity of Dogmatising*, published in 1661, which is quoted in a shortened form by the author himself in his notes. Here is the passage :

"There was very lately a lad in the University of Oxford, who was by his poverty forced to leave his studies there ; and at last to join himself to a company of vagabond gipsies. Among these extravagant people, by the insinuating subtlety

of his carriage, he quickly got so much of their love and esteem as that they discovered to him their mystery. After he had been a pretty while well exercised in the trade, there chanced to ride by a couple of scholars, who had formerly been of his acquaintance. They quickly spied out their old friend among the gipsies ; and he gave them an account of the necessity which drove him to that kind of life, and told them that the people he went with were not such impostors as they were taken for, but that they had a traditional kind of learning among them, and could do wonders by the power of imagination, their fancy binding that of others : that himself had learned much of their art, and when he had compassed the whole secret, he intended, he said, to leave their company, and give the world an account of what he had learned."

*The Scholar Gipsy* is one of the most popular poems of Arnold. Indeed, it is one of the most popular poems of the Victorian period, the only poem which surpassed it in this respect being Fitzgerald's "Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam," which, however, is a translation, though a masterly translation, and not an original poem. By the way, we cannot even for a moment believe that

the translation is, as the western scholars allege, superior to the original. This is not, however, the place to enter into any elaborate discussion of their relative merits. Suffice it to say that Fitzgerald's *Omar Khayyam* is at best a translation, though, of course, it is, as we may frankly admit, one of the finest translations in the world's literature. Leaving *Omar Khayyam* aside then, *The Scholar Gipsy* is the most popular original poem of the Victorian period in English literature. Its popularity is due to several causes, mention among which may be made of its truth to nature, its gipsy element of mystery, the elusive character of the scholar, and the degree of escape from the mundane world which it achieves. When we read the poem we escape from the pressure of practical life into a day-dream, and when that day-dream is disturbed by the irritating problems of our waking conceptions, Arnold involves us into another benedictory dream. As Edmund Blunden rightly says, "The Scholar Gipsy represents very closely the ghost of each one of us, the living ghost, made up of many recollections and some wishes and promises; the excellence of the study is in part due to the poet's refusal to tie his wanderer to any actual gipsy camp or any invention resembling a plot. We

may be forced to say good-bye to that spirit,...and in his poem Arnold himself utters such a farewell :

“But fly our paths, our feverish contact fly !  
For strong the infection of our mental strife,  
Which, though it gives no bliss, yet spoils  
for rest ;  
And we should win thee from thy own fair life,  
Like us distracted, and like us unblest.  
Soon, soon thy cheer would die,  
Thy hopes grow timorous, and unfix'd thy powers  
And thy clear aims be cross and shifting made :  
And then thy glad perennial youth would fade,  
Fade, and grow old at last and die like ours.”

It is after that point, when it might seem that his beautiful fable was only to end in trouble and dejection, that he shows his poetry most strikingly ; for, this tolerably logical figure of escape and bondage being worked out, he quietly brings on a new liberty and even wider horizon, an apparent excursus, and in short the triumph of poetry itself over all ‘the pangs that pierce.’ He leaves the pastoral slopes and the divided aims behind, and we are away on fairy seas as in a picture, but not idle as a painted ship ; the gale and the waves and the sparkling sun are our liberators,



and there seems no peril at all of this final transference being reasoned back into a cause of introspective regret." The Scholar Gipsy, like the Nightingale of Keats, is the symbol of fulfilment and freedom in contrast with—

"This strange disease of modern life,  
With its sick hurry, its divided aims,  
Its heads overtaxed, its palsied hearts."

*The Scholar Gipsy* is one of the finest poems that Arnold ever wrote. Tennyson thought it the best of his poems. And so did Arthur Hugh Clough. In a letter to C. E. Norton, the latter says: "I send you M. Arnold's poems. I myself think that the *Gipsy Scholar* is the best." The only other poem of Arnold, which challenges comparison with it, is its sequel, *Thyrsis*, a monody on the death of his most intimate friend, whom we have just quoted, Arthur Hugh Clough, who died at Florence in 1861. But in certain respects it is superior in our opinion even to *Thyrsis*, though the latter is rightly regarded as one of the four greatest elegies in English poetry, the other three being Milton's *Lycidas*, Shelley's *Adonais*, and Swinburne's *Ave Atque Vale*. Both these celebrated poems of Arnold are pastoral in form. In

both of them the same natural scenery is used, the rural scenery round Oxford. The abiding charm of both lies in the vividness and the beauty of their pictures of nature, and in the magic spell cast by their haunting lines over Oxford and its adjacent fields and hills. In both the real theme is the condition of modern life, its weariness, its fever, and its fret, its 'sick hurry' and its 'divided aims.' In both of them there is the same stateliness of utterance, and the same calmly sad undertone. They are the voice of a spirit almost crushed beneath the burden of life. In both of them Arnold lavishes all his powers of description upon the beautiful landscape round Oxford which he so dearly loved. In *The Scholar Gipsy*, however, there is less concession to the artificial conventions of pastoral poetry than in *Thyrsis*, and we feel throughout in the former an impression of eager freshness and ease, which is lacking in the latter. *Thyrsis* is more consciously elegiac and more ceremonial. *The Scholar Gipsy* is perhaps the most charming, as it is one of the happiest in conception and execution, of all Arnold's poems.

In the latter part of the poem, the poet finds a natural opening for his characteristic pensive moralisings upon the sick hurry and divided aims

of modern life when men are but 'half-believers' in their 'casual creeds'—as contrasted with days when 'life ran gaily as the sparkling Thames,' and when it was still possible for an 'Oxford scholar poor' to pass through them 'nursing the unconquerable hope' and 'clutching the inviolable shade.' *The Scholar Gipsy* is at once a pastoral idyl and a modern elegy, a beautiful fancy and a pathetic judgment upon the illusions of modern endeavour. The grimness of the poet's usual intellectual habit is for the time transformed into a genuine sweetness and light; and the search for a classical subject, or one involving the deliberate construction of a considerable framework, is for the time unnecessary. The poem is a fine symphonic movement with its depiction of a summer landscape, with Oxford's towers in the distance; its brief retelling of Glanvil's old tale of the 'Oxford scholar poor;' its chronicling of the rumoured encounters with the mythical figure of the scholar gipsy, culminating in the poet's own fancied meeting: all rising to the moral issue of the later verses, that only by flying from the feverish contact of modern life and the infection of its mental strife can the human spirit hope to discover wisdom and peace. The poem closes in one of those beautiful sustained similes which

Arnold was so fond of composing, which, without fracturing the unity of the poem, justifies itself by its inherent beauty of phrase and image. The comparison is an original amplification and changes the whole poem into an unanticipated glory of romance. It gives with admirable picturesqueness the contrast between the man of antique simplicity and far-reaching aim and the versatile schemer of modern life, with shallow views and divided purpose. The grave Phenician, carrying out beyond the western straits to the Atlantic his corded bales of substantial merchandise, is a type of Ancient Culture, while the merry Grecian coaster, passing only from isle to isle of the Egean with perishable cargo of ripe fruit, fish and wine, pleasing to the palate indeed, but not of enduring worth, is a type of Modern Civilisation.

In order to appreciate the inner mood of *The Scholar Gipsy* it is necessary to understand its author's peculiar relation to the spirit of his time. About the middle of the nineteenth century the withering wind of material science blew across the old orthodox belief in God and Providence. It took away the traditional faith and offered a poor substitute of evolutionary progress in its place. Arnold felt himself suddenly set adrift in a world

of lost faith and blind desire. His intellectual fibre was too tough to permit him to come to a compromise with what he believed to be a reliance upon a mere reed and too fearless to make a common cause with the Tractarians in their blind rejection of the obvious fact ; yet he expressed a poignant regret at the decay of the old faith and the impossibility of accepting the new philosophy of science with its alluring appeal. Besides, by the time Arnold began to write poetry the revolutionary enthusiasm of the Byronic period had died, leaving disillusionment and regret. Arnold manfully faces the new age, but he cannot forbear looking back upon the earlier peace of spiritual assurance as something for which there can be no compensation. In his own words :

“Wandering between two worlds, one dead,  
The other powerless to be born,  
With nowhere to rest my head,  
Like these, on earth I wait forlorn.”

This elegiac note of regret and longing for peace of soul is heard in many of his finest poems. It is heard in the cry of *Empedocles on Etna*, in the lyric plaint of the *Strayed Reveller*, in the ‘melancholy, long, withdrawing roar’ of the sea in

*Dover Beach.* It is heard in *A Summer Night*, in *Heine's Grave*, in the famous *Rugby Chapel*, in *The Grand Chartreuse*, in the two poems in memory of Obermann, in *The Buried Life*, and in *Self-deception*. In certain poems, like *Self-dependence*, appears a new note of stoical resignation and a noble resolve to go forward and bear and do what-ever is to be done. But the maturest expression of this mood is to be found in *The Scholar Gipsy* and *Thyrsis*. They are among the most exquisite examples of the classical spirit in English poetry. Arnold was classical by intellectual affinities. In fact, with the exception of Milton, no English poet is so saturated with the classical genius. By reason of the serene self-command, the harmony of tone, the measured fitness, the sweet reasonableness, the balance, the Virgilian dignity and grace, the unerring urbanity of form, and the liquid clearness as of an Ionian sky, which are displayed in *The Scholar Gipsy* it is one of the finest examples of the classical spirit in English poetry. At the same time, it is also essentially modern in thought and Romantic in sentiment. Its melancholy, its worship of natural objects, its yearning for another happier and healthier time, and its infinite regret over the materialisation of life by the

intrusion of science—all these are derived from the poet's nearness to the romantic movement which had just closed. It is, in fact, this unique union of Romantic sentiment with Classic form which sets *The Scholar Gipsy* with its sequel *Thyrsis* apart from all other poems, and which distinguishes Mathew Arnold from all English poets. The only other English poet, so far as we know, who unites romantic feeling to a classical and austere precision of style is Andrew Marvell. But Andrew Marvell is a minor poet; whereas Arnold is with Tennyson and Browning one of the three greatest poets of the Victorian period.

The poem is composed in an intricate ten-line stanza rhyming *abcbca deed*. Except the sixth, all the lines are five-foot long; and the shorter sixth line, which is a trimeter, is a well-judged relief from the longer lines. The basic rhythm is iambic. In his *Metres of English Poetry* Enid Hamer says that this stanza of Arnold's *Scholar Gipsy* is "one of the most notable metrical inventions of the Victorian Age."

